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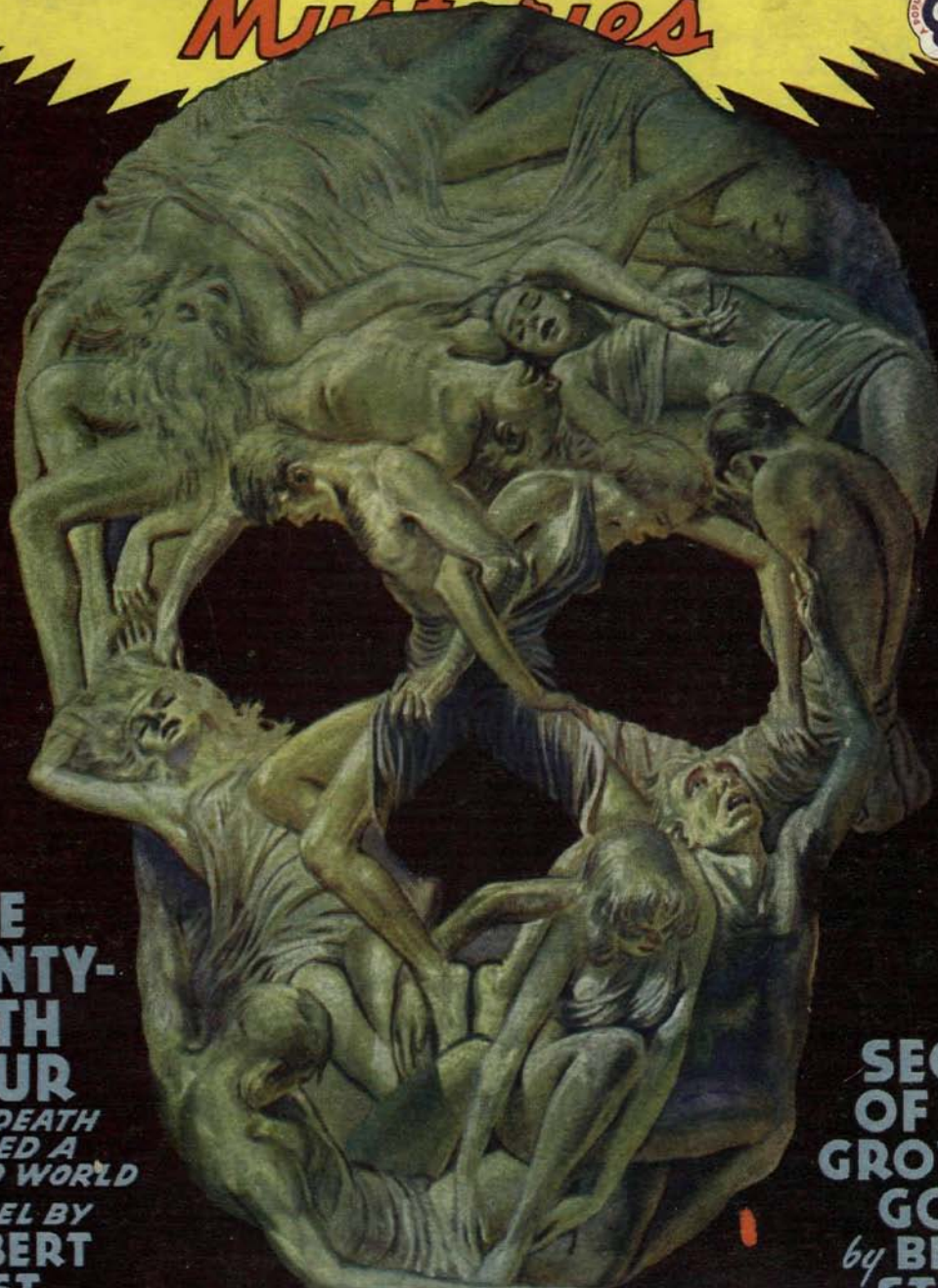

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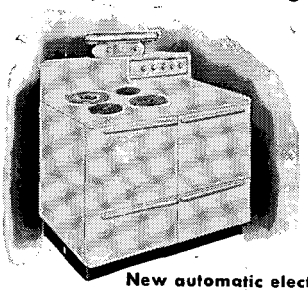
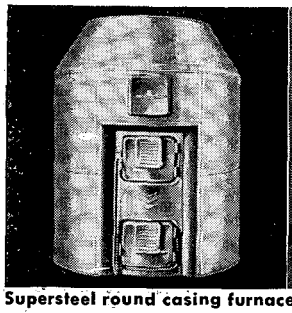


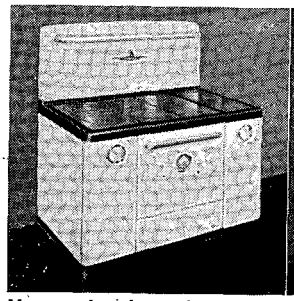
New automatic electric range

KALAMAZOO'S Big News



Supersteel round casing furnace

New combination range



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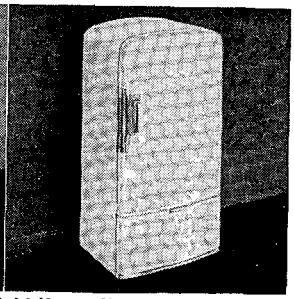

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THE GANGSTER CAME TO COLLECT, BUT THEN...
KEITH GRAY, ACE MOVIE DIRECTOR, HAS JUST PRESENTED STARLET EVE WENDY TO HIS ACTOR-SON, JOEL, WHEN A TOUGH STRANGER ENTERS THE DRESSING ROOM...
BIG TONY DON'T LIKE TO LOSE $5000 AT DICE, GRAY. I'M HERE TO GET IT BACK
I-I-T'S NOT HERE
JG
SO-O-O. THE DOUGH'S IN YOUR HOTEL ROOM, HUH? THEN SEND YOUR PAL HERE... AND HE'S GOT JUST 10 MINUTES OR ELSE...
I'LL GO, SON
MY SON GAMBLING WITH THUGS! THIS COULD MAKE A NASTY SCANDAL
IT WORKED! IT WORKED! AND HE SAID MY ACTING WOULDN'T FOOL A CHILD!
COME ON, NOW! A QUICK CHANGE AND A SHAVE BEFORE HE GETS BACK!
WHAT A SWELL BLADE! NEVER HAD A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE!
THIN GILLETTES REALLY RATE. THEY'RE MIGHTY KEEN AND LAST A LONG TIME
HERE'S THE MON-- WHY, WHERE'S THAT THUG?
RIGHT HERE, DAD. THE MAN YOU SAID COULDN'T ACT—LARRY PHELPS!
HE'S HANDSOME
TO THE NEW STAR OF "LITTLE AUGIE, GANGSTER"
...AND HIS LEADING LADY!
WHAT A GIRL!
A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE ALWAYS MAKES A HIT
FOR PLEASANT, COMFORTABLE SHAVES THAT PEP YOU UP, USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING. ALSO THEY'RE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, SO THEY PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
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Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

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VOL. 7 AUGUST, 1946 No. 5

Book-Length Novel

The Twenty-Fifth Hour — **Herbert Best** 10

Two alone against a world gone mad, a man and woman fight against incredible odds to find an answer to **Tomorrow.**

First North American Magazine Rights after book publication purchased from Random House, N. Y.

Short Story

The Secret of the Growing Gold — **Bram Stoker** 116

Margaret Delandre was dead, but her hate was a living thing that followed inexorably the every footstep of her murderer.

First North American Magazine Rights purchased through George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., London, England.

The Readers' Viewpoint 6

In the Next Issue 91

The Lawrence Portfolio 115

Cover and inside illustrations by Lawrence.

All stories in this magazine are either new or have never been printed in a magazine.

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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries,
All-Fiction Field, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York

THAT APRIL ISSUE

Dear Editor:

I knew it was too good to be true: the paper situation hasn't let up enough to allow you to go monthly. Or rather, to stay monthly. I sincerely hope that paper soon becomes so plentiful that our mag may have 300 pages and be published bi-weekly.

But now to the April issue at hand. The cover, as are all by Lawrence, is very well done but, in the future, let's leave the half dressed gals to *Esquire*.

At last one of the fine fantasies of S. Fowler Wright, "The Island of Captain Sparrow", graces the pages of our mag. And a very good one it is. An adventure fantasy calculated to enthrall the reader with its action and description. The picture of a degenerate race is vividly painted by the masterful pen of the author. We must have more by Wright, perhaps "Dawn", "Deluge" or "The World Below."

"The Willows." One of the greatest horror-fantasies ever written by one of the greatest writers in the genre. Anything I could say about it would be entirely superfluous. So I only say, give us more and more Blackwood.

Benson's short story didn't impress me particularly but I know this author has written many fine stories, so keep 'em coming.

All together now: *We want Dunsay; we want Dunsay!!!!* How about publishing one of his novels, perhaps "The Charwoman's Shadow" or "Blessing of Pan"? And in the meantime keep his short stories coming.

The illustrations this issue are superb. And all full-page with the frontpiece almost a double-page spread. And the decorated borders are back. Oh joy! Oh bliss!

Fan-atically yours,
LLOYD ALPAUGH, JR.

R. F. D. No. 4
Somerville, N. J.

APRIL ISSUE TOPS

Although I have been an avid F.F.M. fan for a good many years I have never yet contributed anything to your Readers' Viewpoint column, so here goes. I enjoyed your April issue immensely, particularly your cover illustration which in my opinion was one of Lawrence's best. I completed "The Island of Capt. Sparrow" at one sitting and I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. "The Willows" by Blackwood is an old favorite of mine but I derived as much pleasure from rereading it as I did the first time I picked up the story. "Roderick's Story" by E. F. Benson also made a hit with me so I guess my first letter will not contain any gripes. All in all your magazine is tops with me and I really think that now, with your more frequent issuance, it is perfect.

In closing just a word to any Haggard fans who happen to read this. I have three new copies of one of his greatest stories which I would like to trade for works of his that I do not have. The titles I have are "She", "King Solomon's Mines", "The Witch's Head", "Swallow", "Allan Quatermain", "Finished" and "Cleopatra."

Keep up the good work.

WILLIAM D. KIRSCHNER.

107-38 88th St.,
Ozone Park 17,
New York, N. Y.

LIKED CAPT. SPARROW

The April issue of F.F.M. has given way to the keys of my typewriter. Hence the following:

I honestly didn't believe you could excel the last number but your superb selection of stories has proven me unmistakably wrong. Though I had read both shorts previously, "The Island of Captain Sparrow" was so fine that the issue lost none of its value. As a matter of fact it streaked across the finish line way out in front,

(Continued on page 8)

S. Fowler Wright

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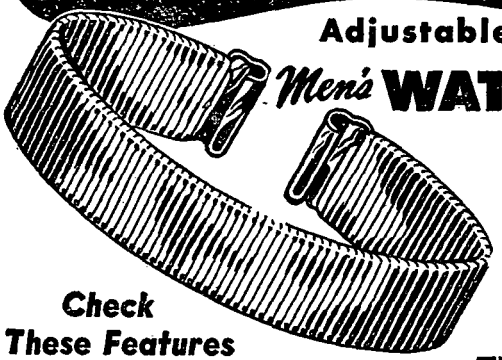

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(Continued from page 6)

leaving the other current vehicles of fantasy breathless in its wake, as usual.

About the lead novel, hard to swallow was Marcelle's trip to secure decent apparel and from what I later read, it didn't help the poor girl much. Darn those thorny bushes! Don't pass up "Deluge", "The Screaming Lake", "Megiddos Ridge", or "The Secret of the Screen". All by S. Fowler Wright and as exceedingly good as they are rare.

As you know, many of our favorite authors resort to the use of some fictitious source book, such as the "Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow". Well, I received the surprise of my life, when lo and behold I found one that actually existed. I am referring to F. M. Crawford's "The Witch of Prague" mentioned in "The Man with the Glass Heart" by England. This the Munsey publications presented to their readers in the second F.F.M.

Many have been clamoring for Olaf Stapledon's work. The stories of this author, with perhaps the exception of "Odd John", are plotless and tend to read like history. For this reason the magazine buyer who expects a few hours of light adventurous reading would hardly be satisfied.

I am still trying to complete my collection of F.F.M., so here's the list. I need all of Vol. 1 except Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5; all of Vol. 2; all of Vol. 3 except Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6; all F. N.

If you have these, don't fail to write as I'm getting desperate.

And thanks for the coming Machen stories. That's all from where I stand.

R. I. MARTINI.

310 W. 66 St.,
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F.F.M. AT THE PACIFICON

Attendees at *The Pacificon* (the 4th World Science-Fantasy Convention) have a special treat in store for them. "Bal Macabre", the supernatural story by Gustav Meyrink, will be dramatized by Theodore Gottlieb, leading Hollywood character actor to be seen with Orson Welles in "The Stranger". The noted European raconteur will additionally present several other fantastic monologs.

The dates are July 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Another high-light of the Convention will be the auctioning of Lawrence's beautiful pastel cover done for F.F.M.'s "The Island of Capt. Sparrow". A number of outstanding black-&-white interiors from previous issues of this magazine will also be available.

Catherine Moore, Ray Bradbury, L. Ron Hubbard, Leigh Brackett, Cleve Cartmill, Henry Kuttner, Ross Rocklynne, Robert Heinlein, Curt Siodmak and a number of other well-known writers of imaginative literature are expected to attend, as well as in excess of a hundred fantasy afficionados.

Last minute memberships may be obtained from me.

WALTER J. DAUGHERTY.

1305 W. Ingraham
Los Angeles 14, Cal.

"OLD CAMPAIGNER" SPEAKS

Since I am a charter member of F.F.M. and have devoured and still possess all 44 issues I feel that I may raise my voice as befits an old campaigner and loudly state that it's the best magazine of its type on the market. I admit I was staggered when the new policy of non-reprint of pulp stories was instituted but certainly we readers have not been forced to take a reduction in the quality of material since dished out. Without further ado I believe the 10 best stories are, in order of merit:

"The Dwellers in the Mirage", A. Merritt; "The Citadel of Fear", Francis Stevens; "Creep, Shadow", A. Merritt; "The Blind Spot", Hall and Flint; "The Island of Captain Sparrow", S. Fowler Wright; "The Wendigo", Algernon Blackwood; "People of the Golden Atom", Ray Cummings; "The Demoiselle D'Ys", Robert W. Chambers; "The Willows", Algernon Blackwood; "Polaris—of the Snows", Charles B. Stilson.

As far as I'm concerned there are two interesting points in this list (which is an honest and sincere effort, as I've had all issues before me this evening and studied them all). Point 1: Mr. Blackwood has had just two of his stories published in F.F.M. and as far as I'm concerned he was in the ten best both times. By all means let's have more of his offerings. Point 2: Your April issue had just three stories and the two long ones both made my list. "The Island of Captain Sparrow" created a tense atmosphere that I found irresistible and from a layman's point of view showed excellent technique in the author's unfolding of his tale. Congratulations for a wonderful issue!

With many thanks for many enjoyable hours,

S. R. SIMPSON.

Fort Royal,
Virginia.

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I have an incredible (I use the word advisedly) stock of duplicate fantasy magazines and books of all sizes, shapes, ages, themes and what have you, which I desire to dispose of.

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TAINE FAN

This letter is written primarily to enthusiastically second a request which I saw recently in your letter column, requesting the printing of Lovecraft's "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath", in F.F.M.

(Continued on page 123)

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He had time for no more than a glance at the walls sheltering those utter strangers whom he would tomorrow seek to kill.

BOOK ONE: The Woman

CHAPTER I

BLACK against the prevailing whiteness rose an elaborate chateau. Snow smoothed away the grimcrack excrescences which for ostentation rather than human comfort had been added to gable, ridge and chimney. Snow and frost blanketed duck pond, vegetable garden and tennis court, merging them back into the ancient moat from which they had been stolen. The level rectangle of ground, still outlined by the posts which had borne the stop-netting, was a link with the safe game-loving world of the early nineteen hundreds, when international rivalry found cheerful outlet in Davis Cup contests and the Olympic Games. Now, in mid-century, the tennis court was obsolete, as obsolete as the air-raid shelters of the strained existence which had followed. And a moat, centuries old, had again become of greater value than either.

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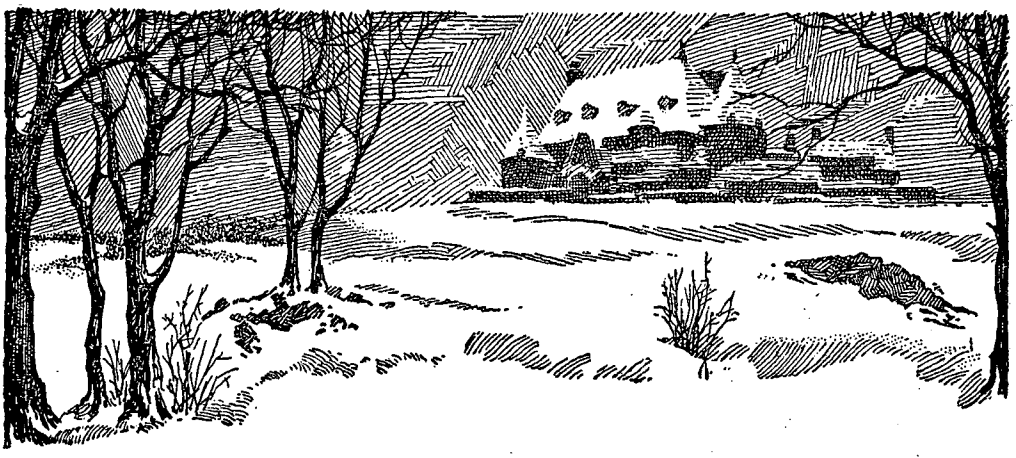

THE TWENTY-FIFTH HOUR

By Herbert Best

***Two alone against a world gone mad, a man and woman fight against incredible odds to find an answer to* Tomorrow.**

Suiting itself, by accident of weather, to the new phase of human life, the country residence of some modern magnate resumed for the winter months the frowning mien of an uncompromising fortress of an ancient Baltic baron. Once carefully sited beyond bowshot, but now offering excellent cover to any machine-gun squad or light-mortar detachment which should chance that way, a small hamlet or group of farm buildings mushroomed up through the flat wearying whiteness.

Fitzharding, shapelessly bulky in long khaki overcoat, ears and chin protected by woolen balaclava beneath his steel helmet, halted his weary mechanical stride and set his unwilling mind to consider the problem, endless and unrelenting as these Northern snows, the problem of survival.

So short a time ago other things had seemed important: friends, work, music, movies. Roosevelt, Hitler, Chamberlain, Stalin. Hitler had died of cancer of the throat, hadn't he? Or had he been assassinated? It was hard to remember, though it had seemed important at the time. Chamberlain and Stalin had certainly died too, among the many millions who had starved. Roosevelt and America were like an Atlantic myth echoing faintly down the ages; though it was Europe, not America, which had sunk beneath the waves—waves of barbarism.

The survivor of a race once called English, of a nation called British, jerked his attention back to the desperate present. From the ornate chimney stacks of the chateau white wood-smoke squeezed out as though reluctant to face the cold, was cut abruptly by the knife-like breeze, and merged into the grayness of the dour sky. Four separate fires were, it seemed, kept up, though this was not the hour for preparation of meals.

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Four fires suggested an amazing standard of comfort in these lean and starving months. But first to examine the hamlet, and confirm that it was as deserted as it seemed. Life was lived these days on primitive military principles, and no one of experience risked leaving a source of possible danger on his flank or to his rear.

Cautious as a beast (or a human of the mid-twentieth century), the figure swung closer to the huddle of low wooden buildings, approaching in a curve which led only obliquely toward its objective, ready at the first sign of danger to sheer innocently off or to dive for cover. Peasants drew no distinctions of race or rank, and an empty revolver was scarce a match for ruthless clubs and pitchforks.

But the snow was trackless. No yellow stains had worked upward to the surface since the last light fall. From the modern metal runners of the barn doors, icicles, formed earlier in the season when temperatures swung between thaw and freeze, still hung unbroken, and on roof of byre or barn no dark and melting patches showed where beasts with their warm breath and bodies had been penned within. Hard to imagine that smoke had ever curled invitingly from the squat clay-plastered chimneys of the wattle and daub buildings. As far as the eye could judge, the hamlet had been deserted for months. But in these days no one trusted to the eye alone. Life was too insecure and a mistake too surely fatal.

THE wanderer made a complete circle until he had the buildings again upwind of him, then raised an unwilling nose from the comfort of his coat collar. Lack of tobacco and scarcity of wood, even for cooking, had, after hunger, been the two main hardships against which his men had grumbled. But the absence of smoke of any kind had allowed the once dulled and neglected sense of smell to develop again. Fitzharding snorted to clear his nostrils and to dampen them. No, no resinous scent such as came from this Northern wood when freshly burned, nor greasy stale-incense odor of the same fires hastily quenched. And peasants, he knew, would stoically face a howling blizzard out of doors, but if the clay and tile stove allowed their small room to fall much below good roasting heat, would shiver in foul ill humor. So now he was reasonably certain that the place was long deserted. But what was once reasonably sure was no longer sure enough, for the standards of caution rose continually as the less cautious were eliminated from the earth.

Cautiously he slipped the chin strap of his helmet, thrust the knitted balaclava back from his ears, turned so that the everlasting chilly breeze no longer dulled his hearing with its murmur. He listened, as few but radio enthusiasts or electrical technicians had ever listened in those bygone days of civilization. No sound but the soft sighing of the bitter breeze through the white silence. And it seemed that the white silence, too, strained to listen; that all Europe listened ready to run, watched ready to spring.

The chateau called for different tactics from those which had served in the approach to the hamlet. Peasants would murder a stranger out of hand, simply for the crime of being a stranger. Poor devils, they could not afford the chivalry of their masters, a chivalry which spared the gentle and hanged the burel, as it had in the days of feudalism. To claim the gentle and privileged status of an officer, to make it more evident to the eye, Fitzharding stopped and unwound the sacking and straw which had protected his booted legs from frostbite, unhooked and turned back the sheepskin collar to display his officer's tie.

A shave, a haircut and a bath would certainly have helped to make the picture more convincing. The most he could do was to put a little life into his stride, a touch of cheerful jauntiness in his demeanor, and, casting precaution aside, make straight for the main gate, as one who confidently expected and deserved a welcome.

But even as he approached he provided for the contingency of a rude rebuff by making a soldierly survey of the terrain. There was no cover for an approach force, except the hamlet, and doubtless the master of the chateau had that watched. A plain of snow undulated to the outlines of fields and perhaps streambeds hidden beneath it. The moat would offer no obstacle. The drawbridge looked thick enough to give bullet-proof protection to an assault force hidden beneath it. The walls of smooth gray stone unbroken by windows on this, the north side, were quite unscalable without assault ladders, grapnels or other unobtainable material. The chateau was doubtless well provisioned against either siege or winter.

If the master of the chateau had sense he would see the advantage of increasing his garrison by a handful of well-behaved

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and well-disciplined veterans, in exchange for food and shelter. All over Europe roamed other such starving and desperate bands, less disciplined than his own, the torn remnants of armies, navies, air forces and even city mobs. Westward, as far as the Atlantic, raged murder, looting, anarchy, and surely the commander of the chateau must know this, must welcome a friendly reinforcement of his garrison. With a desperate assurance which dared not admit the risk of failure, Fitzharding swaggered on.

The walls, heavy blocks of well-masoned stone, loomed yet higher as he approached, but there were no corner towers with loopholes to pour enfilade fire upon assailants, and unless the canopy of snow masked them, there were no crenelations crowning the walls to give body cover to defenders. As his feet sank into the drifted snow upon the drawbridge, another hope was confirmed. The drawbridge was fixed, immovable. It was not merely frozen down, but lacked even its lifting chains, and the slits, through which the chains had once passed to pulleys, counterpoises and windlasses within the gate-tower, were bricked up.

The massive iron-studded gates, in excellent repair, stood deep within the shelter of a square tower. There was no portcullis, nor grooves in the masonry to show that there had ever been one. Nothing so modern as a bell, but a rusty iron ring was fastened to the small wicket door in the right-hand gate. Fitzharding raised the knocker and pounded twice, loudly, and, after a pause, a third time.

Having verified that there was no slit above, of the kind used by defenders to pour boiling oil or lead upon unwelcome callers, he laid an ear to the crack of the wicket gate and listened. By the lack of reverberation or echo when he pounded it was probable that the usual open space or courtyard lay beyond. Now he heard slow, and apparently unwilling, footsteps crossing from the right. Then no porter was stationed in the gatehouse itself, and also no sentry. . . .

A flap opened suddenly behind a wrought-iron grille in the gate and, before he could speak, was slammed shut again, leaving only the impression of a blue watery eye set between bushy brow and beard. No squeak of bolt withdrawn, not even a pause for question and detailed scrutiny, only the sound of footsteps retreating whence they had come.

Fitzharding set himself to analyze the information the man had unwittingly supplied. A faint scent of stale tobacco had drifted out from the man's beard; his boots, clattering as he walked, meant that they still had firm soles, probably reinforced with pegs or nails. It showed too that there was enough manpower and initiative within the walls to keep paths through the court swept clear of snow. Even the fact that the man was old by face and footfall proved something, for without those sheltering walls old men and old women were infrequent.

A LONG wait ensued as he grew hungrier, and his legs exchanged their chilly ache for a more dangerous numbness. He could hear distant voices across a corner of the court and the stamp and click of livestock stirring in warm and cosy stables, as they too heard the voices and hoped to be fed or watered.

He knocked again, and raised his voice in a loud and friendly, "Hullo there!" Then he coughed as the frost bit at throat and lungs. Even here, protected from the wind, to stand and wait was to invite frostbite. He must go.

Half across the drawbridge he turned his head to see if he were watched. He felt a smashing blow on the rim of his helmet, a wrench at his sheepskin collar. . . . Someone had fired down upon him from the battlements, fired to kill. Swiftly he turned and ran, stumbling through the snow, zigzagging as best he could at the moment when he judged the rifleman would have reloaded.

A second shot, the *thuck* of a bullet kicking into a drift. He laughed aloud, as still on the run, he snatched up straw and sacking strips and dived, breathless, into the shelter of the hamlet.

The people of the chateau had declared war! Good! The blood seemed to run more warmly in his chilled veins as he stooped to re-swaddle his legs in their shapeless bundles. Of course the odds would be on the defenders, men behind stone defenses, and armed with rifles and ammunition. The attackers' rifles, lacking so much as a single round; were good only for a bayonet charge. But swift death in action—people always killed their wounded now—would be heaven compared with this bitter, slow starvation.

He had no time for more than a backward glance at the walls sheltering these utter strangers whom tomorrow he would seek to kill. He must make what speed he could on the back trail, for these North-

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ern days were short and the light failed early. Mile upon mile, each pointlessly like the last, each desperately barren of life, of shape and color; and slowly, inevitably, for lack of any external stimulus, his thoughts fell back to weary circling, to demanding with dull reiteration why life had dropped back to this senseless barbarism.

How it all started was history now, unwritten history for lack of any who might write or read. Basically, the preparations for offensive war had been all to efficient, and the peacetime organization of society had grown too elaborate, too fragile to withstand the shock of such efficient forces of destruction. It was as simple as that.

Doubtless on lonely islands and in wild mountain areas there had been some families, perhaps whole villages, still primitive enough to draw subsistence from the soil as their ancestors had done, skilled enough, strong enough to be independent of the complexities of civilization. But few of all the other millions, men or women, had grown a single vegetable or fruit, knew how to kill and butcher, or were capable of lighting a fire.

Such matters were more conveniently handled by the specialists. For his morning shave a man needed a factory to assemble his electric razor, factories behind that factory to build the machinery to process the materials of which the parts were made, mines and plantations behind those factories to produce the raw materials, factories to build the machinery which operated those other factories, mines and plantations, land and water transport to move materials and machinery and finally to distribute the finished product—whose tiny motor came to life only at the impulse of a giant power-house.

Each daily act, each process of existence had depended upon some such grotesque elaboration. But at the time life had been too complicated and too swift to allow Fitzharding to notice or to realize that the human co-operation upon which they had become dependent as unweaned children was a delicately balanced miracle.

He could have prophesied, had he considered the matter, that city-dwellers, deprived of the service which responded to a light pressure on tap, switch or button, would be like men deprived of hands, even to feed themselves. What he could not have realized, found difficulty in believing even now, was that farmers and cottagers had allowed themselves to be reduced to a like dependence upon utter strangers. It had long paid them to specialize in one or two crops, to sell that produce, and, for the rest of the year, live as did the envied townsfolk, relying upon the services of banks, stores, garages, telephones and public supplies of gas, electricity and water.

War had early destroyed all credit and communications; one district had been left with only cows to eat, another only coal to burn. Invading armies had begun to starve among the civilians of the occupied territory, and had dissolved in frantic search for food. Fitzharding had led his men ever northward and eastward, in search of a backward country of peasants, as other leaders had once sought for Eldorado.

So far his judgment had proved sound. Winter had clamped down a barrier between his few and feeble men and any powerful force which had pressed less urgently forward or only belatedly formed the same intention. But once inside the chateau and possessed of ammunition. . . . If he could only attain that end without too heavy a sacrifice of lives!

Impatiently Fitzharding jerked his twenty-year-old mind back to the more practical planning of efficient killing, and set his shaking legs to race the dusk for the goal of the plantation of larches. There his men were waiting in their shelters of hacked-down boughs. He had promised them—God knew how rashly—food and comfort within another day or two, and had gone forward to reconnoiter, knowing that the end was near, but never guessing the existence of the providential chateau. They'd be grousing, of course, but confident in his ability as a commander to make good his promise. To do so he must order more killing, and he was sick, mentally, physically sick, of slaughter, slaughter, slaughter.

Damn the castellan for refusing friendly shelter, for showing him once again his fatal weakness as a commander. He knew it all too well, already: the folly of one who always sought to solve the problems of a savage destructive present in terms of a cultured constructive past—a past which he could never live again.

The windows on the south side were low. . . . There was timber in the hamlet. . . . Some ruse to occupy the attention of the defenders. . . .

ANOTHER reluctant dawn turned the dark snow to a half-hearted gray, barely troubling to distinguish the walls, their snowy caps and the sky above. Then,

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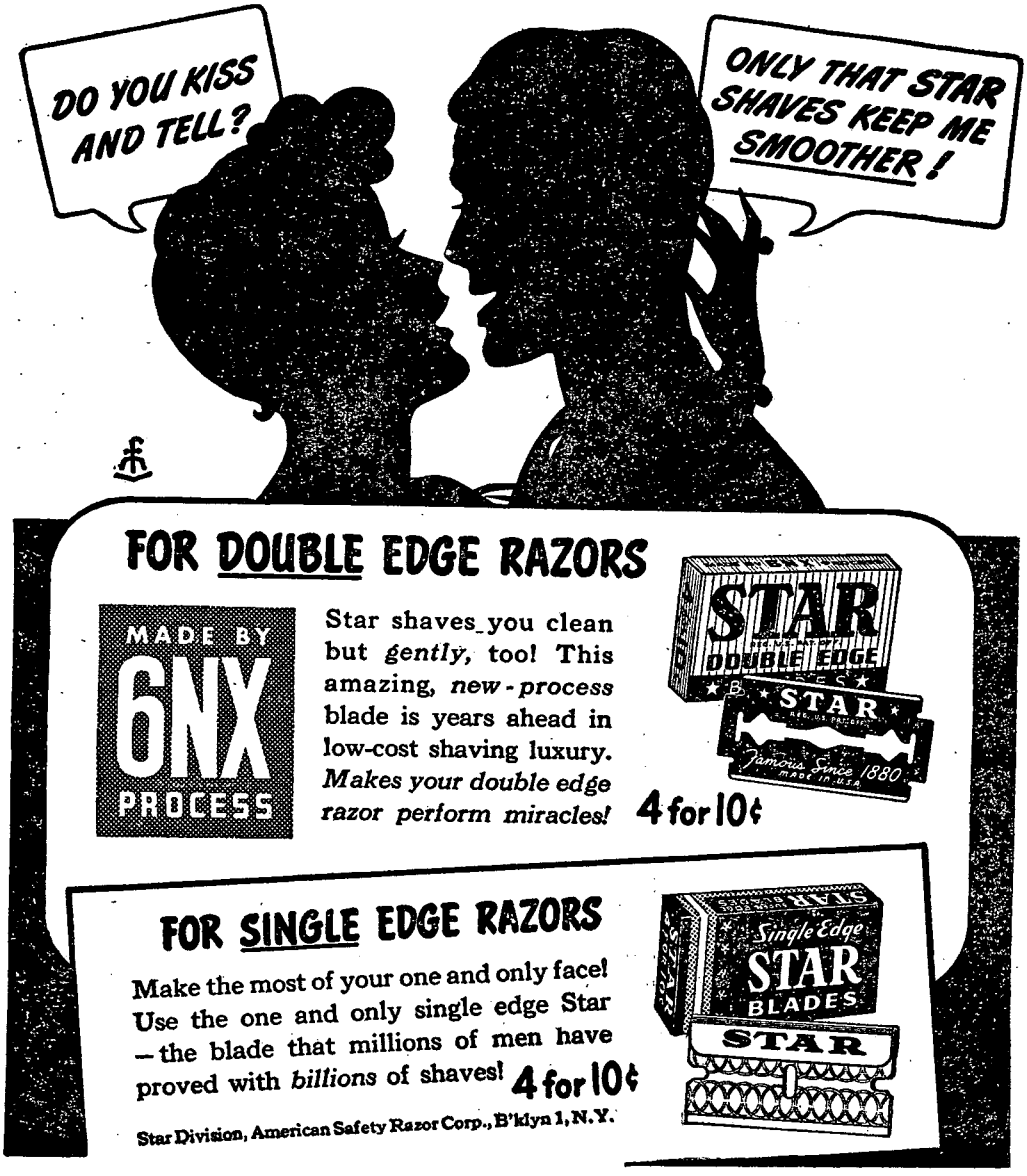
as though starvation and the relentless cold had sapped the strength even of the universe, the sickly apology for daylight went no further. Dim in the dimness a figure crouched on a pile of faggots, blowing on something which he nursed tenderly in the shelter of his hands, continuing to breathe upon it until a point of red began to glow. Anxiously he fed in pieces of straw. Tedious work, but safe, for here in the deep gateway he was sheltered from sight. The unbroken wastes of snow showed clearly that the defenders sent out no patrols nor stirred beyond the walls. No reason why they should; there was nothing to interest them in the surrounding wastes. The chateau was—strange parallel but a true one—like an oasis in the desert. Like an oasis, too, it held the necessities of existence, and those outside must capture it or perish. It should be a good fight.

Small hand-to-hand combats, even the preliminary battles of the war, had not troubled Fitzharding's nerves. Now that his decision was made and his orders given, he looked forward to the coming fight. One way or the other it would solve many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difficulties. The only doubts that remained were whether his tactical dispositions had been sound.

Now the straw had caught, was sending up yellow smoke as he carefully placed it on the ground and piled on more. A fresh burst of flame and now he had a faggot well alight and crackling.

From overhead in the gate-tower came a guttural shout. Someone had smelled the smoke and given the alarm. Or perhaps the many tracks leading to the gate had been discovered. Anyway the fight was on. One more precaution—that of piling smoking faggots beneath the spy-hole with its iron grating, covering the grating itself with strips of sacking until the smoke would mask it. Now to action.

With difficulty Fitzharding raised a heavy balk of wood and swung it battering against the great gates, filling the peaceful courtyard with threatening reverberation. Not for long did he continue this, as strength had long since been a stranger to his body. Big men fare ill when starvation rations are equally divided. Dropping the battering-ram he piled more faggots so they would make the greatest smoke. Neither fire nor his ineffectual pounding would seriously threaten the iron-bound timber of the gates.

Back to the pounding again. Then he took up the easier clattering with pistol-butt against the wicket, coughing up smoke while he clamored orders to imaginary men behind him.

Voices rose beyond the gate, in the courtyard. Shouts and more shouts, women's startled cries, and the clatter of running feet swelled in the winter air. Good. He had the defenders' full attention.

Hidden by the gate—how fortunate the arrow-slots had been filled in—he shouted hoarsely, choking in the swirling smoke, pounded now with pistol-butt, now with heavy timber. He bounded out beyond the protection of the entrance for a moment to scoop snow with his steel helmet, and leaping back, damped down the scorching flames to thick oily smoke.

More snow, and yet more. He was kicking the blazing embers about to quench them. He had underestimated their dry inflammability—a serious miscalculation. The gateway was oven-hot, unbearable, his overcoat smoldering first in one place then in another, and despite a protecting elbow the flames were scorching his eyes. At any moment now he would be forced out into the open, and the emptiness of his one-man threat revealed. Yet still he pounded and yelled, in an assortment of voices.

Sergeant Conely must have failed in the attack, though there had been no sound of shots, or he had misunderstood the careful orders, though that had never happened before. Fitzharding plunged bodily into a snowdrift, rolling like a dog to ease his pain; he plunged back among the lessening smoke, the growing flames. Trembling, he could no longer raise the heavy balk, but. . . .

The crack of a rifle, the duller note of a shotgun, both barrels in succession. At last!

More shouts within the chateau, and words in English: "At 'em, boys!" "Get him with the gun!"

Then grunts, muffled curses and groans, sounds which Fitzharding knew so well in the stabbing and struggling of close quarters. Suddenly bars rattled, and the gates began to move, scattering the flaming embers. Empty yet threatening pistol in one hand, the other elbow shielding his face, Fitzharding thrust through the gap.

Sergeant Conley was howling in his ear, "This way, sir. Keep close under the wall. We got the bloke with the gun, but there's two rifles in the east wing."

Two motionless bodies stretched before him on the cobbles, and three others were still writhing. They, and the otherwise deserted court, emphasized the warning. By the sounds the fight had resolved itself into a desperate struggle inside an archway in the center of the west wing. Then, down the wide marble steps leading from the house, which formed the south side of the square, strolled Private Ledderwick.

"Back! Get under cover, you fool!" Fitzharding yelled warning.

Empty rifle at the trail in his left hand, intent only on tearing with ravenous teeth at a piece of looted crust, Private Ledderwick took his two last strides. A hand, slim as a young boy's, thrust a rifle from a window above Fitzharding's head. He saw the muzzle leap, heard the crack. Private Ledderwick cast the crust from him, as one whose appetite has languished, lay gently down without dropping his rifle, and began to stain the whiteness of the marble steps.

EVEN before Private Ledderwick lay still, Fitzharding and the sergeant had found the nearest doorway and were charging upstairs. Someone must mop up the sniper before he did more harm. A twisting wooden stairs led them to an open

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door and the room from which the killer had fired. Empty.

But a rope, clumsily tied to the leg of a massive bed, hung from an open window above the moat, and leaning against the wall beside it was a Mannlicher, sporting model. Fitzharding grabbed it up, slipped off a glove and verified by touch that there was a round in the chamber, thrust head and shoulders out of the window. The rope still swung a foot or two from the snow, and a dark-clothed figure was climbing, slipping back again, struggling frantically up the farther side of the frozen moat.

There was time to kneel, to rip open his coat with its clumsy collar, and cuddle the butt comfortably to cheek and shoulder, to rest his left hand on the low sill. The ivory fore-sight, lost against the snow, came into clear definition on dark breeches and coat, rose till it rested neatly on the line where neck joined shoulders on the scrambling figure. A perfect target for a spine shot, impossible to miss.

The trigger finger, smoothly increasing its pressure, allowed the fugitive to reach the level ground. Thus, in the old days, had one given hare or rabbit a few paces "law" to avoid blowing it to bits. But no shot was fired.

Fitzharding slipped on the safety catch and rose to his feet. "Ammunition's too scarce to waste" was an excellent excuse, "and she won't do any more harm . . . die within a couple of days perhaps . . . no food out there, no shelter. We know what that means. She hasn't even an overcoat."

Sergeant Conley appeared to swallow the excuse. But this recurrent weakness of outmoded sentiment was dangerous, not only to himself but to the men for whom he was responsible. In strength and cunning he could pass muster. But it was only by making himself colder and more efficient than rival leaders in the struggle for existence that he could hope to preserve the remnants of his company and the frail thread of civilization and decency they might carry over into the future. He swung back toward the stairs.

"Always search the cellar first." His tone reproved both himself and the blameless sergeant. "We ought to know that by now, and not be wasting our time up here." People had a way of setting fire to the winter's fuel. One lot had tried to blow up a place. And there was risk of his own men getting at the wine and making themselves helpless to resist a determined counterattack.

Fighting had swung to a corridor below, and, by the shouts, was still going on in the west wing. But no more shots. A quick rush carried Fitzharding across the dangerous open and up the marble steps. Wide open doors. He halted just inside. No sound but Sergeant Conley's slow munch-munch of Private Ledderwick's discarded crust.

A central hall floored with polished wood-blocks, huge trophies of beasts and ancient weapons on the walls. A double staircase soared, a majestic horseshoe from right and left, and those doors at the foot of the stairs would lead as usual to salon and dining hall. The entrance to the cellar was usually behind the main stairs. Yes, here it was. The door was locked, but the sergeant's bayonet jimmied it open.

Black stone steps, slippery with damp, led to warm darkness. Fitzharding stood by with the Mannlicher while Sergeant Conley raided kitchen and servants' quarters for a light. He was back almost at once with a guttering tallow dip; once you were used to this house-raiding business you could find things as though by instinct.

Sergeant Conley's "Careful, sir!" had been said before on a score of cellar steps of equal sliminess. By custom he slung his bayoneted rifle, that his spare hand might shelter the dip from chance drafts, for matches were long unknown. By habit developed in the days when the officer's revolver still had ammunition, the sergeant held the light to shine over his right shoulder, so that it would define the sights. The search was as routine a matter as though castellan and butler were carrying out their monthly check of the wine bins and the cellar book.

They found a cavernous crypt with barrel-vault stone ceiling. Hanging strings and straw-covered mounds of vegetables were stored away from the frost. There were many tubs of pickled meat from beasts slaughtered when the summer grazing gave out. More than enough to keep the men till spring. And with so much here, there would be smoked meats up above, hanging from the kitchen ceiling. As usual one whole wall was stacked ceiling high with neatly sawed fuel wood. But there was nobody in hiding, which was strange, because someone or other always took refuge in the cellar.

ANOTHER door, not locked. Beyond it rack after rack filled with bottles, and on a heavy stand against the wall ten

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large barrels, bigger than hogsheads, perhaps containing wine before it was drawn off into bottles. One was still dripping. They saw also square bins which in days of prosperity held bottles, but the first held only corn. So shortage of manpower had already turned plowland back into pasture, made grain scarce enough to be stored alongside the wine. Scarce and precious indeed, for the second bin was empty. And the third. . . .

"Out you get!"

There, shrinking into a corner of the hiding place, was a man, if you could call it a man, a cringing, bleary creature, rolling his eyes in helpless terror. He was young, not more than thirty, and should have been out in the open in defense of his home.

Fitzharding laid aside his rifle and, stooping, took a grip of the creature's grimy collar and swung him out. The remaining bins yielded no fewer than five prisoners. An old man, part cripple, perhaps with rheumatism; an equally old woman who first screamed and then seemed disposed to resist till warned by the sergeant's bayonet; and three children, none over ten years old, more puzzled than scared.

Sergeant Conley looked meaningfully at the two men.

"I suppose so," said Fitzharding, "but outside, where it's easier to clean up."

Driving the prisoners out before them they reached the open air. The fight was over, the courtyard no longer deserted. Two men, shapeless bundles of overcoats and rags surmounted by steel helmets, had slung their rifles and were carrying one of the wounded in from the murderous cold. A short dark man, with the two stripes of a corporal on his arm, straightened up from examining the body on the steps and saluted.

"All clear now, sir!" he reported. "We knocked in the window without no opposition, and leaving two men to 'elp the sergeant 'ose ladder was a bit on the short side, we mopped up the 'ouse and the west side, leaving the east side and the gate tower to Sergeant Conley's men as ordered." He paused for breath. "And not finding the sergeant, I posted one of his men on the tower over the gates as lookout, and the room below would make a good guard chamber, sir."

Fitzharding approved. "Relieve the lookout sentry as often as you can, and get a fire going in the guardroom. There's likely to be a keen wind up there on the roof. Oh, and take over these prisoners from Sergeant Conley."

Corporal Merriwether called up two men, and marched off the wondering civilians. It was all routine, this making good of a captured house, almost a drill, which was conscientiously performed, whether the halt was for an hour to collect foodstuffs or a week to rest sick and wounded. On a few occasions they had been received as friends, had taken only bare necessities, and had left with apologies, but this was one of the more usual situations. Women had already been herded into one room, children into another, and the doors locked upon them. Wounded, their own wounded of course, had been brought into the kitchen for warmth and dressings.

Two men were already detailed off as cooks to get a hot meal ready. The dead would be left out to freeze until they could be dragged out beyond the walls and buried. In a few minutes there would be no men of the defending force left alive. Already Corporal Merriwether had imprisoned the women and children handed over to him, and marched the two men out across the drawbridge.

The officer turned to Sergeant Conley. "We'd better start our inspection of the place, and let the sentries on the stairs get rest and food in the kitchen." That again was a matter of routine, the guarding of stairheads and other strategic points, until officer and sergeant had checked each room and passed it as empty of defenders. "And while we're at it we'll note where the defenses can be strengthened, and start to lay our plans for the winter."

And outside the gate, by his implicit orders, two cheerful kindly English soldiers who would not so much as kick a dog would be wiping their bayonets in the snow, while Corporal Merriwether bent over an old man and an idiot to see that they were dead or nearly so.

All a necessary part of the process of survival. Survival for what, Fitzharding wondered. Was there any future?

CHAPTER II

FROM the lookout on the tower came periodic assurance that nothing moved over the level and deserted snows. Sentries posted within the buildings in turn reported no sound of any occupants. But carefully, foot by foot, Fitzharding and his sergeant combed the chateau.

Starting on the ground floor they ex-

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plored the stables, the cow byres, the carriage house and cart shed on either side of the gate, prodded the winter's store of fodder in the racks and lofts with pitchfork and bayonet, checked each bin of beans and rye, checked each room, each store, each box.

No need to frighten the hostage children in the gatehouse room below the guard chamber by inspecting them; they were probably worried enough as it was. But as soon as men could spare time from their duties they'd be chatting with them, trying out on them smatterings of French, of loudly spoken English, of army Hindustani and even Cape Dutch. Within a week at most the children and the soldiers would have established a friendship and a working *lingua franca* which might later prove valuable.

But the women in the barn must be faced, in case they were concealing a man or two. Not while there was a living male of theirs left, not counting mere children, of course, would women submit to the most obvious defeat. That had been proved, time and again. But once assured that their men were dead, some primitive instinct permitted them to relax their opposition, even to turn toward the conquerors. Here, huddled together like sheep, in the corner farthest from the door, were women tall and short, young and old, clad in shapeless peasant gowns of some warm woolen stuff, padded beneath with many petticoats with here and there a man's coat for additional warmth.

They were too swathed in clothing to proclaim their sex by outward shape, and the features of some were hard as those of any man. Hair? Yes, they all seemed to have long hair. But feet were the one sure test. Fitzharding saw wooden-soled clogs, with stiff leather uppers, shapeless felt slippers of some indoor workers, perhaps the cook and housemaids, even a pair of down-at-heel ballroom slippers, but no men's boots, forgotten when the owner slipped on feminine disguise, and no man's foot crammed into women's footgear.

He ignored the shrill clamor of voices, tears and at least one shaken fist. "Thirty-two, aren't there?" he asked the sergeant.

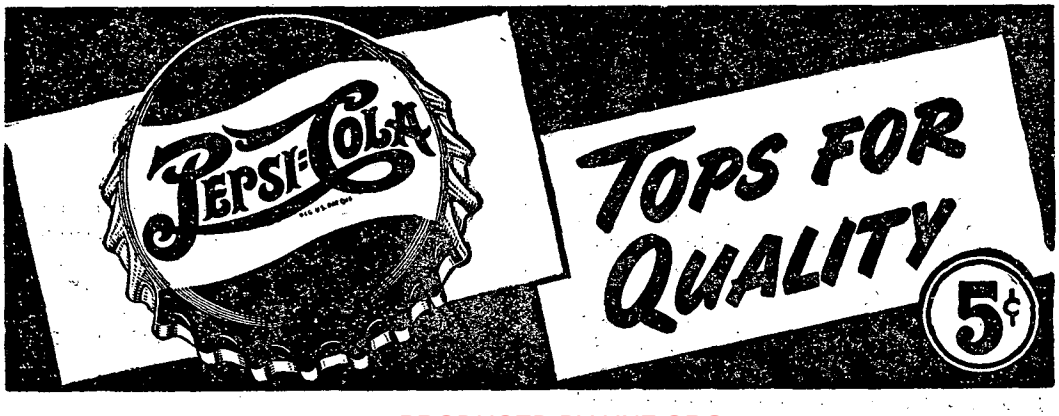
"That's what I make it, sir."

"Good. Tomorrow we'll sort them out into cooks, dairymaids, housemaids, and get them back on their jobs."

They departed without ceremony, hastily padlocking the door behind them. Then across the east wing, dismissing another sentry on the way, marched the invaders. There was yet a third purpose behind this detailed inventory of the place, and that was to note, or at least to seem to note, the position of every article in the chateau, and thus to impress upon the men the certainty that any looting would be detected. Looting started fights among the men, and what was worse, loaded them down when they came to march. They could not even yet grasp the worthlessness of gold and silver ornaments, or even jewels. Soldiers lived a life in a way as mentally secluded as a nun's. Private Akroyds had asked quite seriously, only the other day, "When will this war end?"

But the war had dissolved with the dissolving governments. Soldiers now floated about in the resulting solution, seeking a mother-crystal of stable government or society to which to attach themselves, and found none.

Continuing his tour of inspection, Fitzharding found smaller bedrooms in the west wing, and a disused dormitory, perhaps for extra labor at harvest or wine-pressing time. There were hard and narrow beds, gaudily painted chests for



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clothes, a few brown pottery or tinware basins, some grimcrack ornaments, pink or gilt, hanging with crucifixes and sacred pictures along the wall. Below he found a well-paved dairy, kennels which no longer smelled of hounds, and a carpenter's shop.

In the east wing the rooms were larger, the beds wider. The ornaments were more florid and costly than across the court. Perhaps the married quarters. There was yet another dormitory, also unused, but once perhaps for girls, if the opposite one had been for men, and, beyond, some rooms of unknown purpose. One had a green and battered French hunting horn still hanging from a wooden peg, and there were dusty tangles of wool and leather and wood that might have been connected with falconry in bygone days.

Two huge looms, one with a half-woven warp, and no fewer than six spinning wheels still shiny with use, constituted an excellent find. Below, stood a forge and blacksmith's shop for the repair of farm implements, and next door some of the implements themselves, horse-drawn but quite modern: cultivators, reapers and binders with incongruous American names, like "Queen of the Prairie."

IT WAS surprising at first how much had been assembled beneath the one series of roofs. But this was partly, no doubt, for the protection afforded by the walls, or in order that people should not be idle during the long Northern winters. Perhaps this had much to do with the retention of crafts such as weaving and cobbling which elsewhere were done by machinery. It was an ideal rest-camp for Fitzharding's troops until the spring. But with late spring would come other bodies of soldiers, some larger, some better armed. This could only be a resting place, not a home.

"You'll take the east wing, I expect, Sergeant Conley, and leave Corporal Merriwether the west. Divide the men equally; there are more than enough rooms to go round; arrange for alarm signals, rallying points and so on as usual. Find out what craftsmen we have left, and get volunteers for shoeing, smithying and wheelwright work. The busier we keep ourselves this winter, the fitter we'll be when we have to march in the spring."

"Too true, sir." The sergeant gave his emphatic approval. "There's no objection to the men helping the women with dairying and such like in their spare hours off duty?"

"None at all. Tell Corporal Merriwether to list all food and consumable stores and bring the list to me, so that we can work out rations."

That brought them in the late afternoon through the gate and out beyond the drawbridge. There was an inventory to be made here, but of another kind; of the price paid for the comfort and protection of the chateau. Friend and foe, including the two caught lurking in the cellar, lay in the same orderly row, engaged in a wide-eyed examination of the dull gray sky above. Ten harmless men had died in defending their home or as the price of defeat. Five or six, counting the man with the buckshot wound in his stomach, would have died in search of food and shelter. Two more were wounded, but, with reasonable luck, would recover.

But the sergeant's mind was more practical. "Leaves us seventeen effectives, sir, including ourselves." And as they turned back toward the gate, "If you can spare the time, sir, the men would be grateful to take their pick before it's gone too dark to see."

Well, they deserved their new wives, the only substitute for home life and affection that was now available; just as he, Fitzharding, deserved his, though in his case it was going to be a bath, a wallow in a really hot tub with a glass of sherry beside him, if the cellar could produce such a thing. It had been in his thoughts, on and off, ever since yesterday, sustaining him as the vision of the Holy Sepulcher sustained the old Crusaders.

"Right. Fall them in in the courtyard, and facing east, as usual, so as to have the best light."

The men fell into line with showy precision that was in curious contrast to their tattered remnants of uniform and their burst boots bound with wire and rag and string.

Sergeant Conley slapped the small of his rifle. "All present and correct, sir. Three men sick, two on duty in the cookhouse, one on lookout."

"Carry on then."

From some inner pocket in his much swathed body the sergeant produced a leather purse, and asked the officer to draw lots for the five men off parade. No point in allowing for the man with the stomach wound. Then starting at the head of the front rank he allowed each soldier to draw in turn a grimy discolored domino, stepped back from the ranks and began to call.

"Double naught, naught-one, double one, naught-two, one-two. . . ."

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A man stepped smartly from the ranks, showed his naught-two, and fell in on the sergeant's left. Two-three was the next. Fitzharding had drawn two-four and four higher numbers. In a few minutes the ranks had re-formed in single rank in order of their draw. The sergeant, whose dominoes had to take the place of canteen, recreation room, Y.M.C.A. tent and war-time concert parties, collected them and re-stowed their leather bag before issuing the next order.

"Corporal Merriwether, take two men and march out the females."

One by one the captured women were passed out of the door of their temporary prison, halted there a moment while their thumbs were tied behind them with short lengths of twine. Only one made pretense to struggle, though most, particularly the older ones, protested volubly at this indignity. Formed up in a rough line almost twice as long as the line of men opposite, they fell silent, glanced uneasily at each other, even less happily at the bayonets, some still stained from recent use.

Last of all they surveyed the grimy bearded faces of the men, and seemed to breathe more freely; here jerked a head to throw back a lock of hair, there helpless hand attempted to straighten a twisted skirt. One, black-haired and heavy-eyebrowed among her flaxen-haired sisters, perhaps a gypsy type, burst into relieved laughter, and flashed a challenging look along the row of grinning soldiers.

Perhaps her courage appealed, or perhaps it was that her action had picked her out and so saved a numbed and weary brain the need to choose. The little earnest man with the gingery beard who had drawn naught-two beckoned her unhesitatingly, and placed her behind him.

Fitzharding announced his first pick. "For the sentry, the third woman from the left there." A pleasant plump little person stepped out. She seemed neither worried nor angry, but on the verge of a vacuous smile. The smile broadened as she came forward, picked by the man in obvious authority. Fitzharding hoped the sentry would not, throughout the long winter nights, have cause to curse his commanding officer.

HIS other selections, when they came, were less simple. For the two cooks two women who would not be unprepossessing when cleaned up a bit; they might even be cooks themselves. But one could not guess another's taste in female beauty. For the two wounded likely to recover he chose more middle-aged women, in the hope that they would be less likely to get into mischief while waiting for their men's recovery; and they might also be trained as nurses.

To his embarrassment he found five pairs of eyes studying him from his steel helmet to his worn-out boots. One of the cooks' future wives made a remark which caused a general chuckle of laughter to run through the other women, and raised an expression of dreamy anticipation in the eyes of the plump girl he had picked for the sentry.

Two elderly women were set apart to look after the young hostages in the tower, then the choice went round again, and eleven men, including the sentry for whom Fitzharding deputized; had an additional pick of women. The method had once been to leave a pool of extra women in case any chosen women proved unsatisfactory, but this had led to disputes, and now all were allocated, even the elderly ones. These seemed to have no objection, now that the purpose of the parade was known. They stepped briskly forward, even casting backward glances of triumph to those as yet unselected.

Well, that was that! Except for a final word to the men. "Women of men not on parade will be placed with the hostages for the time being. We will hold a mass marriage ceremony tomorrow. Each woman must be allowed to carry on her accustomed duties, and the husband to whom she has been allocated will be held responsible for her appearance and behavior. As soon as our stomachs are full we've got to spruce up a bit ourselves. If a man can't control his woman he must give her up, but don't let me hear any complaints from them or see signs that they have been badly treated. Last of all, if any man interferes with another man's wife he'll be brought before me. That's all. Carry on, Sergeant."

As he acknowledged the salute and left the parade ground, he was aware that the five women he had selected made as though to follow. Well, Sergeant Conley could attend to that. Then the sergeant barked an order. "Corporal Merriweather, fall out your men and march them to your barracks in the west wing."

Fitzharding kept on up the white steps. The stain left by Private Ledderwick was now darkening. He noted it without emotion. But he was glad that the "woman parade" was over, glad that he, as an offi-

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cer, was entitled to follow not so much his conscience as his taste. An officer could afford to be a freak; it was even expected of him, for that gave the men a chance to set him apart, if they could, on a pedestal. Of course the woman parade was justified.

The women soon shook down to the conditions, and on the whole obviously enjoyed them. For the men, the women had become next door to a necessity. Home leave, letters to and from wives and sweethearts, the Salvation Army, Y.M.C.A.'s, concert parties behind the lines, rations, even tobacco, had ceased to exist. And the men were humanized, not brutalized, by these marriages.

When cities and communications had been bombed out, when organized warfare had begun to break down, soldiers—though not his, thank God—had lost their wits in hunger and despair, and revived all the old medieval atrocities, from sadism to plain murder. Civilians, women and children as well as men, had armed themselves as best they might, trapped deserters sick and wounded, murdered and tortured. Neither side had taken prisoners, but for its own safety, and to save food, had killed all the other side it could lay hands on.

That was realistic war, carried on by starving men on foot as it had been inaugurated by magnificent bombers over helpless cities. To save the women and give comfort to the men was surely a double gain over this war which gave no quarter. But only by what Sergeant Conley called "domesticating" the women could they be made safely loyal to the conquerors.

Men had talked of "realistic" diplomacy, and "realistic" war, but women were the true realists. From the pre-war rôle of feminist, usurping man's traditional place in home and nation, to the more ancient rôle of captive was a transition as easy to them, apparently, as a change in hats. All they asked, according to that authority, Sergeant Conley, was that their first scruples about taking on new husbands should be overcome by a show of superior force—at the most a tying to the bedpost for the first night or two before they agreed to be married.

PRIVATE JONES, Fitzharding's batman still though empires fell around, had been on parade. So there was no chance of the bath and drink as yet. Might as well try this door on the left of the entrance hall. It led into the paneled dining room, unmistakable from its dark polished table, heavy, and full thirty feet in length. Chairs, deeply carved, with faded needlework hunting scenes on seat and back, were arranged around the wall; at the end of the room tall thrones, obviously for the castellan and his lady. More heads and weapons on the paneled walls.

A naturalist or big-game hunter should be able to tell from them what country this was, whether Poland, Esthonia or where. That might be discoverable later from the library—there would certainly be a library in a place of this size and tradition—if the books were printed in any language which he knew. Well, the dining hall would do nicely for mess; they would all dine together to build up a clan feeling, to replace in part the formal system of discipline once enforced by the King's Regulations.

Across the entrance hall simpered a white-paneled, richly gilded salon. Furniture under dust-covers exposed spindly curlicue legs. Tall French windows opened on to marble balconies like sugar-icing. Impossible to heat, impractical as a temporary hospital, thought Fitzharding. Besides, the stomach-wound would be dead before morning, and the other two would be lost in here.

"Beg pardon, sir, I bin 'untin' 'igh and low," said Private Jones, the batman, an unfamiliar, shrunken figure without his overcoat. "I got your room fixed, and a bite of something to eat. The cooks can't find more charcoal, and the wood's fair smokin' them out of the kitchen." This implied that the real meal would be delayed.

"It's over the cook-'ouse, sir," he continued, "which keeps it warm. It's been in use, so it ought to be aired. The other rooms 'as damp spots on the ceilings from the snow on the roof, and dust just about everywhere."

Fitzharding gulped a bowl of soup, scalding hot, without wasting time on the spoon, gasped and blinked. Blinked not merely at the pleasant pain of the hot broth, but at what he saw. This silken boudoir seemed scarcely the place for a down-at-heels barbarian. From the deep-piled rugs to the mirrors, silver-backed brushes, cut-glass perfume bottles on the wide dressing table, it was manifestly the bedroom-boudoir of some pampered woman.

But Jones was beaming. "Lovely, ain't it? There was a kind of lady's dress across the bed, and some shoes and stockings dropped on the floor, but I 'ung 'em in the

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wardrobe, sir, along with the other clothes. And I found you these slippers in another room."

While Fitzharding sat on the edge of the tester bed, his batman drew off the patched and rotted boots, the felted remnants of two pairs of socks, and thrust the slippers on his bare stained feet.

"The taps don't run in the bathroom, sir. But I got a couple of cans of water from the kitchen pump, and I'd best go to see to it that nobody takes 'em off the fire."

Fitzharding removed his overcoat to wrap around his feet, rubbed one against the other to start circulation. Having dodged frostbite, it would be absurd if the hot bath started some civilized affliction like chilblains. Immobilized, with nothing to do but wait, he gazed out between the satin curtains over the inhospitable, slowly darkening snow. As night closed down upon this land, so had dark barbarism closed down upon civilization, but more swiftly, less peacefully. It had been, he knew now, so obvious, so inevitable, each stage of breakdown proceeding so logically from the stage before. Yet at the beginning of the war he had no premonition where it would lead.

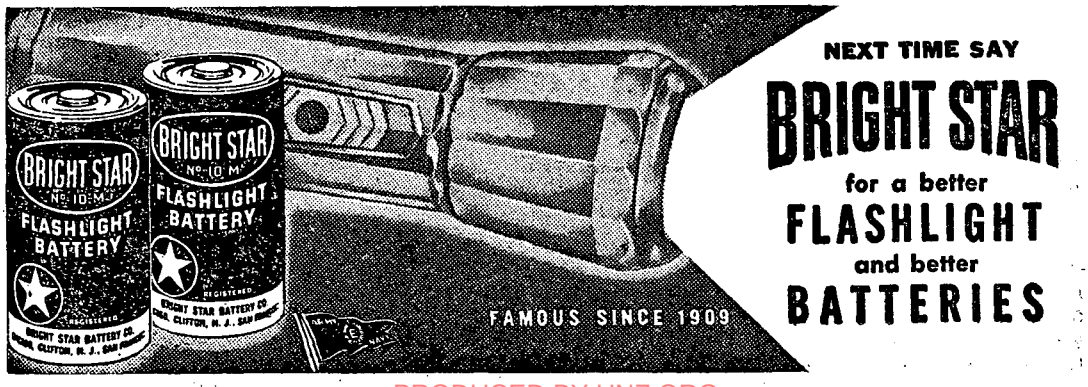
He had enlisted, as his kind had done in the Great War a quarter of a century and more before, had been transferred to an Officers' Training Corps, whence he had been snatched, delighted, though only half prepared, for service in the new Air Auxiliary Infantry. Already the important cities and the munition centers had been burned out by air attacks, by reprisal following upon reprisal until each side could claim each new act of terrorism an act of justifiable and righteous vengeance. For technical reasons the air forces of the world were formed of bombers, not fighters; planned for offense, not for defense.

The terrorizing of civilians, not the killing of fighting men, was the accepted aim. One air force attacked and was met by no air defense. The opposing air force retaliated by bombing, spraying, gassing and burning out the civilians of the first power. The theory was that your own civilians would stand up under the slaughter, but that the enemy civilians would be broken in morale and disorganized. If they did not immediately sue for peace, their factories and munition works would be unable to make good the wastage in planes and engines, replace the stores of oil, gasoline, high explosives, lethal gases.

Armies, actuated by this "spirit of the new offensive," marched, but made no attempt to hold their elaborate defense lines nor to make contact with the enemy and fight for decisive victory. Their function was to occupy enemy territory, to wipe out the ground equipment of the enemy bombers while their own bombers increased the disorganization of the enemy state.

FITZHARDING, newly commissioned, had been ferried across by troop planes with men and elaborate equipment for destroying a German bombing base in enemy-occupied Holland. He had been landed on an island surrounded by inundation from the broken dykes. The water was too shallow for ships, too deep to allow the passage of tanks or infantry. Hence the island received its supplies and reinforcements by air. Since it was thus well nigh impregnable it was extremely valuable to the Allies, if they could capture it. For this reason it had been spared both bombing and long-range shelling.

A team of five very youthful officers and a company of veteran troops had been trained to the yard and the split second



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on identical terrain in the Norfolk Broads, then dropped by parachute on a moonless night from high over the landing ground.

Someone had blundered, which was not surprising, in view of the disorganization which was already taking place in all the armies. By ill luck it was the night of the famous comet, even the exact moment of its appearance. Like a colossal star-shell, like a thousand very lights or landing flares, it gleamed through the opening parachutes, and in the light of their incandescence made the void below yet emptier. Fitzharding would always remember that first moment of active service. Five hundred parachutes close-huddled, floating like huge white jellyfish, far above the black waters, and drifting slowly westward toward the pinpoint island far below.

Then darkness.

Hell let loose, with shells bursting among the fragile floating gossamer. It was no use pulling at the shrouds to spill wind; that would only land one in the water. One could only float helplessly, and watch others, punctured and torn, drop suddenly through a searchlight beam to be lost in the darkness.

The transport planes did their clumsy best to create a diversion, diving heavily upon searchlights and guns, raking them with ineffectual machine-gun fire.

An eternity of suspense. A jarring landing. A moment to pull the parachute release, to stumble to one's feet. Then the assault. And the assault, against all laws of chance and tactics, had succeeded; because the enemy G.H.Q., disorganized even before the attack of the Allies, had furnished their forgotten outpost with no fresh supplies of food, personnel or ammunition for many months.

As with the ancient Romans, so with the modern Europeans, the letters A.U.C. denoted the start of an era. After the Unlucky Comet armies were no longer coordinated. Nations were ceasing to be nations. That must have been one of the last organized troop movements ordered by the British Government before it melted out of existence. For, ironically enough, the new system of warfare upon civilians, "realistic warfare," it had been called at the time, proved too efficient.

Nations were too disorganized to sue for peace. Troops, well in the heart of each other's country, found their home communications gone, no instructions, no supplies, no ammunition. Desperate civilians were burning large tracts of country, removing anything eatable that they could find, poisoning wells with dead bodies, while armies broke into corps, into divisions, into smaller and smaller units which, living on the country as they went, sought to percolate back home. Now, more than ever, enemy forces avoided each other. There was no time for the luxury of fighting pointless battles, when rats had to be caught, a handful of oats sorted out of a manger, or a dozen men organized for the hunt of a dog or a stray sow. A coney-catcher became more valuable than a general.

Frenchmen, Englishmen, Netherlanders, Belgians, Spaniards, Germans, Danes and other nationals whom Fitzharding had never identified, had ebbed and flowed upon a sea of famine up and down and across the whole face of Europe. And it was probable that the same anarchical conditions extended even beyond Europe.

Some who reached home to find no home remaining, turned vengefully back to what had been enemy country. These were the worst, killing thereafter for the joy of killing, burning and torturing ruthlessly. But such hot rage was inefficient, as futile in the last analysis as the pointless pillaging drifting of the others, and Fitzharding saw that he must set himself one clear aim, and logically pursue it.

England, he knew, must be, like France and Germany, infested with four armed foreigners to one surviving civilian. Ships, lacking coal, lacking crew, lacking provisions, were rusting in port even before the transport plane had carried him overseas. There had been no news of America and the Western Hemisphere except an early rumor that germ warfare had broken out in Brazil. Since he and his men could not swim the Atlantic, Fitzharding saw that the only way out of the land of chaos lay to cut right through it, and then east and north.

There had been no danger from enemy forces, even those which outnumbered his detachment, for no one fought except as dogs fought over a bone. Hunger, thirst, poison and other traps laid by civilians were the main causes of casualties, reducing his men, over a hundred at the start, to a mere quarter of that number. The casualties seemed heavy but were not, really, when one considered that anything from dysentery to a sprained ankle which made a man drop behind the protection of the column meant, as a rule, his death.

When spring came he must lead his

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survivors on again. If only he had the slightest training for the task, had taken modern languages, read geology, geography, engineering, anything useful. There were no Cook's guides these days, no tourist agencies, no letters of credit, no railways, no steamers. And how did one any longer recognize where one was? Hills could look like mountains, and actual rivers had no neat printed labels along their banks as they so conveniently had in atlases. Small remnants of history reminded him how rivers had dictated the line of march of ancient armies, and this would happen again. The Rhine, the Danube and other big rivers would be alive with tattered, murderous gangs which had once been the sleekly trained and uniformed armies of the world.

Fitzharding's reverie was broken by the sound as of someone at the door. Good lord, it was dark. He must have been sitting, brooding for half an hour, if time still existed. Jones had drawn a full-length bath, half-filled with glorious steaming water. He even provided the luxury of a small piece of yellow kitchen soap. Promise of more luxury to come, for from the bedroom came the crackle of twigs as Jones started a fire. The stimulus of hot water brought back the ability to feel the stiffness of his limbs. Scratches and sores which had refused to heal out there in the cold began to sting; he dabbed soap on them, for the hurt was a promise of comfort to come, of personal rehabilitation during the coming winter.

Came another promise, this time to his nose, of a meaty odor straying up from the kitchen below, making his mouth run with saliva. A new life was starting for him and for his men, a life which included cleanliness, meals, sleep, warmth, and even sanity. He started to lather his face, encountered to his surprise a beard. That must come off! For it was a symbol. "Barbarian" meant "Bearded One."

DURING the short hours of winter daylight a sentry remained posted on the tower, like a masthead lookout scanning the lifeless sea of snow. Except for a plantation of larch, or something similar, visible on the northern horizon, and the irregular clump of huts and sheds of the nearby hamlet, the ocean was empty, remained empty, seemed as though it could never have been other than empty, until it was difficult for Fitzharding and his men to believe that, starving and despairing, they had ever struggled across that void.

Pure chance had brought them within view of the chateau, and there were no other settlements according to Sergeant Conley's information, within a couple of days' march. From the same source came other information: That the land had once been rich and much more closely populated; that the landlords' bailiffs had sucked the country dry while the owners lived luxuriously in foreign capitals; that on the liberation of the "slaves"—serfs, probably—the young and able-bodied had migrated to the young and growing towns, generation after generation—Fitzharding tacitly queried whether the process had gone on more than three generations—leaving the older people to till less and less ground, to produce fewer and fewer offspring. Their villages had been abandoned, one after the other, survivors coming in to work the home farm and live in one miserable hamlet under the protection of the castle walls. This estate was only typical of many.

Ought not the land to be richly forested? Fitzharding had a vague memory of school geographies giving this impression of all the Northern lands. Sergeant Conley promised to inquire.

From a military viewpoint the news was good. It meant that to the north and the east, as well as to the southwest, the direction from which they had come, lay wasteland. It would be a void whence no danger could march during the winter months.

But no commander trusts solely to good fortune. The window through which the assault had been made was at once repaired. This and all other second-story windows had been barred against such easy entry in the future with lattices of heavy beams. The carpenter shop worked daily on the preparation of massive shutters, using timber torn from the abandoned hamlet. The gate-porch had been cleared of part-burned faggots, the slits for arrows and boiling oil opened again. In due course, by the expenditure of much labor and ingenuity, the drawbridge had been freed from its brick setting and its ornamental stone balustrade. Its windlasses repaired, it was raised each evening when the guard fell in to the call of the French hunting horn, and at dawn it was lowered again when the reconnaissance party went out to circle chateau and hamlet in search of tracks of night prowlers, human or bestial.

Tracks were found only once, two days after the capture. Small, obviously a wom-

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an's. They led, the men reported, from the east to the hamlet, from the hamlet to a point below the walls of the chateau, and thence back again into the void.

It was easy to guess that the girl who had escaped down the rope had come back, hoping perhaps, through the aid of a confederate inside the walls, to be given secret shelter. Sergeant Conley again warned the men that each was responsible for his wife, and each man was loyally resentful that his "Annie" or "Gertie," as he had rechristened her after some previous wife or sweetheart, should be under suspicion.

But Fitzharding had noted rope-marks in the fresh-fallen snow on a window-ledge, the same window-ledge over which the girl had made her escape. Entry was barred by the new lattice-work, but food and warm clothing could be lowered in the darkness of the night to a shivering shadow down below on the frozen moat. That room was now Sergeant Conley's and the sergeant's wife was Marie, the personal maid of the Jeanne d'Arc of the rifle, who was now known to have been the young mistress of the chateau.

Perhaps the sergeant had not had as much to do with the choice of the room as he imagined. It was also probable that the sergeant, like all the rest of the weary detachment, including their officer, was sleeping each night as though doped. Fitzharding smiled, hoped and waited.

MEANTIME, at Sergeant Conley's suggestion, every room in the place was searched for hidden ammunition and explosives. From the pockets in the dilapidated traveling coach to the dower chests of the women, every reasonable and unreasonable hiding place was ransacked. Men crawled among dusty rafters in the attic, sounded the flagstones in the cellar. Not as much as an old-fashioned flash of gun-powder could be found. The man with the shotgun and the man with the rifle had fired their last rounds. The Mannlicher used so effectively by Jeanne d'Arc had only the one round left in the chamber, reserved doubtless with some melodramatic idea of suicide; then, with greater common sense, abandoned as she made her escape.

Fitzharding ruminated that he could send out a patrol and capture her, for her own good. But later would come the need to subdue the prisoner, and since she had been the mistress of the chateau, that would give her in the eyes of the men a sort of commissioned rank, and make her obedience to the new rules his personal duty. He shied away from the task.

Now that the hope of finding ammunition had vanished, the men's rifles had become anachronisms and must be replaced. As a handle to a bayonet, the heavy modern rifle was unnecessarily elaborate and ill-balanced. Fitzharding studied the trophies of ancient arms which hung in the entrance and dining halls to determine the best and most deadly weapon. Every generation of man had asked himself this question, and here on the walls hung fifty or so of the answers, invented by practical soldiers, and tested in actual fight. Halberds with axe-heads, halberds with bill-hooks, halberds with blades like forked dragon tongues, pikes medium-sized and of exaggerated reach, pikes plain and with fleur-de-lys side-blades like overgrown barbs, with, in addition, heavy woolen tassels designed to shed gore and so prevent the grips from becoming slippery. But none of these would serve his need. They were designed for slow-moving or stationary compact groups of many men. In guerrilla warfare a man with a simple carving knife would have no trouble in dodging under or round their ponderous inflexible stroke and killing the pikeman or halberdier.

Decision was difficult, for the design of a spear-head might count for more in a man's life than three learned degrees; the weapon's reach, an inch less or an inch more, might result in the survival of a village idiot or the death of the president of an international chemical combine of once fabulous wealth and influence. Wherever men met, they would meet each at the point of the other's weapon, and the best weapon, driven by the best arm, would prevail.

Sporting weapons gave the greatest promise. For himself, perhaps that ancient hunting sword with blade a scant eighteen inches long, engraved with pictures of the seasons. Not very useful, but his conventional-minded men would require him to be armed with something which marked him off as an officer, and the killing tool at least was light. For them there were light spears, perhaps used for boar-hunting, with heads ranging from the triangular pig-sticking shape to older patterns leaf-shaped like assegais. He unhooked the least cumbersome of these, and took them down to the carpenter shop to have their brittle worm-eaten shafts burned out of rusty sockets, to be replaced, as time permitted, with tough modern counterparts.

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With straw-stuffed quilting for armor, and using dummy or buttoned weapons, officer, N.C.O.'s, and men held afternoon duels in the court, testing weapon against weapon. Halberds and pikes were condemned as too heavy for single combat, the bayonet was found useless against either sword or light spear. Corporal Merriwether, favoring a sliding grip on a counterbalanced boar-spear, defeated all comers, and proved it superior to all other weapons. Yet when Fitzharding tactfully and most tentatively suggested that it might be good to re-arm the detachment with this new-old weapon, and devise a training drill to fit it, the corporal was the first to treat the idea as something of a good joke.

It did not matter that the lightness of the spear would allow each man to carry several pounds more provisions when they marched out in the spring. It did not count that the spear was better balanced and far out-reached the bayonet. It did not influence their sentiment when Fitzharding pointed out that the rifles had been picked up from deserters and dead when they had abandoned their special equipment of mortars and shoulder machine-guns, and that to be consistent they should have dragged along the useless mortars. Their recruit training had been done with the rifle; the rifle was the only weapon.

The same perverse conservatism turned the revival of long-bow and cross-bow into a pleasant sport, but nothing more. The officer, warned by the reception of the spear, was at pains not to give the military puritanism of his section a second shock.

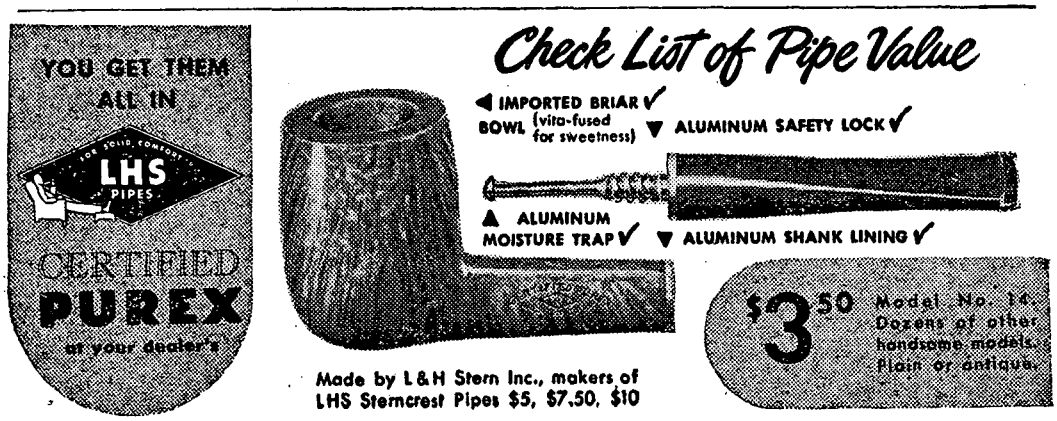
But he put what time he could spare into improving his own bow, and practising at the butts.

THERE were plenty of minor triumphs to offset these small failures. Private Williams, better known as "Waxy," was not, as his nickname implied, a saddler. When he had jointed the Hussars, their only saddles were the rubber-cushioned seats in their tanks, but from his father he had inherited the name and he knew a little of his father's trade, sufficient to experiment in much-needed repair of boots. And the first job of two ex-mechanics who knew nothing of smithying was to hammer iron bars into rough lumpy wire, and from the wire make cobblers' tacks. Wooden pegs, suggested by the women, were used as well, and women directed the tanning of a pigskin to provide more leather.

Almost at once the women settled back into their routine duties. They knew the men's names, divined at once their rank and seniority, learned to say " 'ello, 'Enry!" and such useful phrases as "You carry this for me, no?" They sang curious wailing peasant airs about their tasks, and added simple touches of coquetry to glance and costume.

But fifty-one adults, including the two wounded who had not died, do not adjust to a new pattern of existence without friction, though much of this was mildly comic. Thus a mess-cook appeared on parade with a slowly closing eye, and the story filtered through in due course to the commanding officer; a dispute with one of the women, neither speaking the other's language, as to the amount of some local herb which should be used in seasoning the bean soup.

The man had pushed the woman away, the woman had struck back with an iron saucepan, and then, triumphant in her victory, thrown in a whole handful of the potent herb. At mess that evening hungry men had choked over the violent flavor,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and even the women sitting beside them, despite their more accustomed palates, had turned and rent their sister with angry words.

Fitzharding's own reaction to women had been very slight, his study of them purely empirical, and limited to the needs of each situation as it arose. Food, warmth, shelter, the care of sick men, discipline of the detachment, matters of defense had always come first. When a calory of warmth and energy could be spared from these considerations, and from propelling his weary legs, he had spent it, utterly fruitlessly, trying to see beyond the end of his hegira.

He had tried to envision some possible future for himself and his men, something which each man could hold like a carrot before his nose when on the march, a hope which they could discuss and build into a motive force when they lay packed together too achingly cold to sleep.

Once established in the chateau, warm, well-fed, with the reasonably safe prospect of warmth and food for months to come, his mind awoke to long-sleeping prejudices and condemned the facile characters of these peasants, their lack of decent loyalty to their dead husbands and sweethearts. A day or so of observation, as the routine of the place built up again, and his masculine pride received a shock. Romantic loyalty had found no place in the lives of these people, even in peacetime. These women had borne the burdens of life, plowing, sowing, harvesting, partly, perhaps, owing to the laziness of their menfolk, partly, no doubt, because so many of the younger men, still strong enough for such work, had migrated to the cities.

The women's surprise was obvious when men brushed out their barracks, mended their clothes, started work in carpenter and blacksmith's shops, even lent a hand to the women. In brief, these women's earlier men had become unfunctional, except to sire offspring whom the women must support, pointless forms of life that smoked and spat and ate and drank, and contributed nothing to the communal life. Just drones.

Menfolk, to these women, had not been a serious part of life. If one group of men were removed there were still cows to be fed and milked, butter to be churned, cheese to be pressed. If another group of men took possession of the chateau, there were still baking and roasting to be done, farm implements to be repaired, spinning and weaving to be carried on by the older women who still remembered the process. Men were just a natural phenomenon in these busy lives, which sometimes hindered progress, sometimes aided it, sometimes welcome, more often a nuisance. These women could grow fond of men as of cheerful, friendly dogs, and admire them as they could a handsome if pompous cat. But men were nothing to evoke or justify lifelong loyalty, little to waste emotion over.

This discovery was opportune. Toward dusk of the fourth day, taking his usual final survey of the country-side from the top of the guard-tower, Fitzharding saw what for two days he had been seeking. Far off to the east, in the direction taken by the earlier footprints, he had an impression of a shape moving. Waiting just long enough for the sentry to volunteer a confirmation, he warned him to be blind and, if need be, deaf, then hurried down to make his preparations.

IT WAS simple enough to order the mounting of the guard deferred, lest its horn-call frighten the visitor, to leave the drawbridge temptingly down and the wicket-gate innocently ajar, to hurry out, keeping the hamlet between himself and the eastern skyline, and take cover in one of the partly demolished barns.

The slowly gathering darkness was withdrawing light from the sky, yet leaving upon the snow a gleam as of phosphorescence. The girl must be close by now, not more than half a mile away, as on the east the rising ground limited the view even from the watch-tower. He was sure it was the girl. Having eaten her provisions, probably she had come for more. But whatever her plan, in a few more minutes she could be safely captured.

Vigorous after his four days of food and comfort, he should find no difficulty in running down a girl weakened by privation. Once he had been noted for his running, had even stood a chance for the next Olympic games if his improvement continued. It would be strange if that should be the one thing learned at Cambridge which was of practical value.

Impatiently trying to justify his eagerness, he waited. He wanted her safely inside the chateau. Courage, these days, had come to be the basic virtue. Perhaps it always had been, but its importance had, in civilized life, been masked by the surface impression of safety. The girl's defense of the chateau had been as unskilful

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as it had been brave; her hiding out there in the wilderness as brave as it had been useless. An enemy of such quality should not be left out there to perish.

He heard the squeak of snow beneath slow dragging feet. A dark shadow which crossed the darkening snow in front of his hiding place. In the stillness he heard her unconscious sigh of relief as her feet found the track beaten hard and smooth by men carrying timbers from hamlet to chateau. By now, he judged, she was walking mechanically, her legs taking her onward, but her mind withdrawn from perception of pain and cold. Nothing but supreme effort of will, or sudden alarm, would jerk her back to consciousness.

He slid into the open and followed close behind; no need for cautious stalking. She was on the path to the drawbridge, and her feet, to save themselves more dreadful struggling through the deep snow, would keep her on the well-beaten surface. Now she must have seen, even though her conscious mind did not realize it, the welcoming lights, must have heard the belated ring of hammer on anvil, would be picturing warmth, shelter, food and human society, and be tempted beyond resistance by these prizes of surrender.

Then she was on the drawbridge, in through the wicket-gate without pause or hesitation. Fitzharding followed over the low sill, pulled to the wicket behind him, signed for the drawbridge to be raised. The trap had closed.

The guard with the lantern—yes, they had understood the hasty instructions—and an old woman to welcome her returning mistress. The creak of the drawbridge windlass caused no alarm. Now the old woman had made a deep curtsey, and the girl had jerked to a halt on the point, it seemed, of falling over her welcomer. The old woman was leading her mistress up the wide stone steps toward food, warmth and rest. All hers, as would be explained to her as soon as she was capable of understanding it, if she would withdraw her opposition to the alien conquerors and bear with them in patience until spring.

BACK in his bedroom again, his feet in their rough but comforting peasant stockings toasting before the fire, his face glowing from the cold, Fitzharding allowed himself a measure of self-approval. The girl must be allowed time to recover, to gather from the attitude as well as the words of the servants that the invaders were not devils. Meantime her Marie would have found her and made her comfortable for the night. This room had been hers, but it was hers no longer. War was War. To hand it back to her might be in accordance with old-time chivalry, but everyone, even the girl herself after a momentary gratitude, would mock such generosity.

It would be as well, too, to keep her at a distance, to treat her as though she were in the ranks, to give her orders through the sergeant. With no pay to reduce, no conduct sheets to endorse and a stupid reluctance to institute corporal punishment, it would be hard enough through the winter to get unquestioned obedience from the men. And women had no sense of discipline. It might even be a good thing if this girl took a liking to the sergeant, provided she did not sway him from his loyalty.

Pouring himself his evening wine from the cut-glass decanter, once more he reviewed himself, as he might any other part of the defenses whose strength he suspected to hold a hidden flaw. This new bottle had more body than the previous ones, and it had gained by Jones' careful decanting. It was nothing like sherry, not quite a port, in fact nothing recognizable either by his eyes or palate, but well worthy of slow and discriminate sipping.

Looking back upon these pre-war days, he and all others seemed to have been composed of equal parts of unstable cleverness and sobbing emotionalism. The world's sense of values had been so unbalanced that it was difficult now to regain the feeling of that time. Only the recollection of a concrete instance would revive with any realism a picture of walls normally capped by roofs and sheltering men and women who gabbled eternally about their "rights." "Rights," even the lawyers knew, did not exist unless there were people subject to corresponding "duties"; and no one had admitted duties because the vague word "liberty" seemed to have absolved them from all such discipline.

It was no wonder that, born into and conditioned by such an environment, a leader should later find himself ill-adjusted to this stark world which starkly denied the right even to life itself, unless a man could kill more swiftly than his competitor; that denied food, shelter, fire, the fundamentals, even to those who grew or made such things, unless they could defend them.

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It was more amusing to recall the past than to dwell upon the present and spoil the precious evening hour of wine and relaxation. The most fantastic picture which he could still conjure up was separated from the present not only by time, but by the wide Atlantic. Yet it was typical of the whole world, and the depths to which the human intellect had sunk in its nauseating tendency to direct all effort away from the real needs of civilization. The advance publicity on the Exposition of the Universe about to open in Buenos Aires had been the supreme example of fiddling while Rome burned. And Rome had burned in very truth, Rome, Paris, London, Berlin and a hundred other cities, in one simultaneous conflagration.

Slowly sipping his wine, and watching the firelight glow through its brook-brown depths, his mind dismissed the picture of the bombings, not because of their bloodiness, but for the opposite reason, because slaughter and destruction had grown hackneyed, boring.

Fitzharding drained his glass and filled another. He was beginning to see the answer to his self-question. Sternness to an enemy was not the most important qualification which, as a leader, he lacked. More important still was the medieval mind's lack of qualifications, of half-tones, which gave it the impetus he needed. *"Chretians ont droit, paiens ont toujours tort"* . . . that sweeping statement had swept men off their feet, swept them into the Crusades, swept the *"paien"* Saracen before them. "My country right or wrong!" a more modern slogan, but just as undoubting, just as undeviating. Everyone, even everything, must be divided into friend or enemy.

What an idiot he had been not to see this before! History teemed with examples of leaders who had failed their country or their people through being too judicious; of men, nothing in themselves, who had thrust forward the boundaries of empires, carried creed or race to victory by their blindness to half-tones in men, half-measures in policy. At this moment he, Fitzharding, was endangering his men by his indecision. The girl, the chatelaine, must choose whether she would be friend or enemy. Choose now, be forced to make decision while her will-power was weak as her body. By morning she would have reserves of energy, of resistance. Her influence in the chateau made her too valuable, too. . . .

The gilded door handle clicked slightly, began to turn. It could not be Jones, whose technique was to cannon against it as though to burst it open. Hesitatingly the door swung open.

FEET thrust hastily into his borrowed slippers, Fitzharding rose and bowed. She was young and sensitive of feature for one who had killed two of his men, who had endured four days and four nights out there in the snow. The soft light of the shaded candles, mitigating the lines of recent hardship, made her seem not more than twenty-five, if that. As she removed the furred hood, which must have been lowered to her with the provisions by Marie, he noted she was dark, with straight glossy hair, a well-bridged nose and oval face, setting her apart from the square-faced, blunt-nosed peasantry.

She spoke in the language used by the peasants. Then, a quick glance of her eyes telling her he had not understood, carefully she dealt out French.

"Qu'il faisait froid la dehors! . . . How cold it was out there!"

She shivered, stepped closer to the fire, threw back her heavy coat to allow the warmth to penetrate. Under the coat, and beneath a heavy woolen undercoat, she wore a French hunting costume of dark-green cloth with silver buttons, but with breeches instead of the long, traditional skirt. How slender she was to eyes which had become accustomed to stocky soldiers and the square-set, be-petticoated farmer folk!

He poured another glass, checked an apology in rusty French which rose to his lips. To offer the wine was to offer his friendship; irrelevant that the wine had been looted and the glass already used.

"If a girl drink from a man's glass . . ." She broke off to fix her eyes wonderingly upon him. Then dropping her glance, she thanked him and drank obediently.

She must be tired. He drew another chair up to the fire and helped her chilled fingers remove the black leather boots, now tight and sodden about the swollen feet. It was easier to show her by deeds than by words that if she came as a friend she had nothing to fear, would be treated fairly, even with kindness. She neither rejected his help nor thanked him. The slight effort of removing her boots seemed to exact her last resource of strength, and slumping bonelessly in the chair, she covered her face with her hands and was silent.

A discreet tap at the door, and Private

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Jones entered, for once in comparative silence. Two paces forward, his eyes fixed on a plaster cherub in the ceiling, and he announced, "Your bath's ready, sir. And I took the liberty of informing the messman there'd be one more to table." An about turn of soldierly precision, and a retreat in unsoldierly haste.

Now warmth, rest and perhaps the wine were beginning to work their minor miracle. The girl stirred, and her hands dropping from her face, revealed that color was replacing the blue-white pallor of exhaustion. First doubtingly, then with greater assurance, her eyes circled the familiar walls of her room. She brushed back the dark hair from her forehead and sat up with a sigh of relief. Not difficult to guess her thoughts; that this warm and personal place from which she had been banished was now about her, sheltered her again.

"Another? No?" Fitzharding replaced the bottle. Then, a little contemptuous of himself for such weakness, he touched the greatest height of hospitality. The warm relaxing bath was the supreme comfort of his day, still novel enough to arouse a craving as for a drug. Yet in his halting French he placed it at the disposal of his guest.

She thanked him, struggling, he could see, with reluctance to get to her feet again, to leave the warm fireside. She slipped from her coat and thick undercoat and moved mechanically about the room, searching out the slippers which Jones had tucked away, collecting an armful of garments, creating an odd air of domesticity, even of intimacy. She murmured, as though to herself, something about Marie, then, borrowing one of the candles, went out toward the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Was there anything else she needed? He could get a wash when she had finished, and still be in time for mess. His fingers explored his chin. He had shaved, or rather had been shaved this morning. One man only of the company, the oldest, had skill with the old-fashioned razor, and since safety-razor blades had long since been exhausted, they were all dependent upon him. A minor detail, but indicative of many in the future. Had civilized man gone too far along the road of dependence on the refinements of civilization, from electric razors to food out of cans, from machine tools and mechanical transports to . . . to zipper fasteners, to be able to re-establish himself in a more

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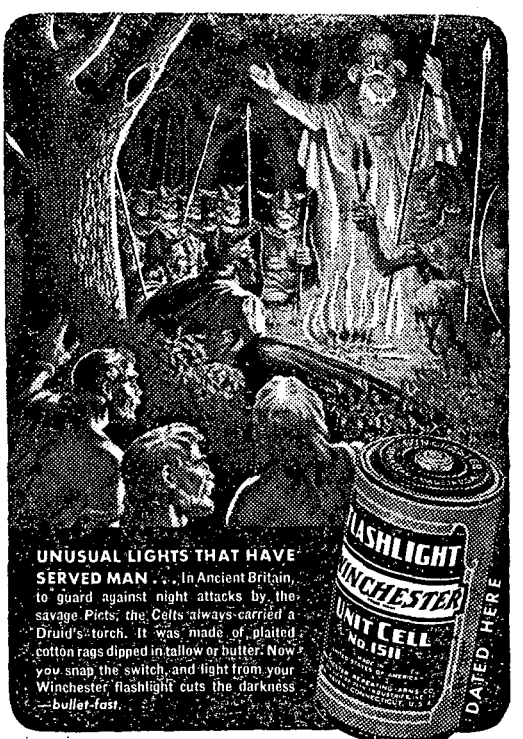
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primitive economy, where everything he used must be made by hand, perhaps even by the hand of the user?

He was back in the land of doubts and difficulties, one man groping, seeking to hold to a standard of culture which many millions were still frantically destroying. When the door opened again and the girl in a bright wool dressing gown smiled her gratitude, he got to his feet. Purposely he killed time in the bathroom, twice brushed his hair, made laborious attempts to give his fingernails an appearance of neatness. Then he knocked at his own door.

"Entrez!" commanded a clear and welcoming voice.

She had put on a long-sleeved dark wool dress with a wide-cut neck and a wide girdle of silver and enamel, pleasantly festive, and more suitable to the long bleak mess hall that evening dress would have been. The dark eyes, sleek black hair with shadows almost blue, and slightly tilted eyebrows were exotically attractive with a costume so unusual as to be undated. She rose from before the dressing-table, swung back a picture on the wall, found the small wall-safe, its door still ajar as she had left it in her hasty flight, and gave an exclamation of pleasure.

"Marie said nothing was taken, but . . ."

Obviously she had not believed her maid. And now she brought out a short string of old-fashioned pearls with a heavy emerald clasp, and turned, child-like, for him to fasten it about her neck. His fingers fumbled and his face grew hot. Tomorrow Marie should be taken from whatever she was doing and returned to duty with her mistress.

Revived by wine and warmth, stimulated and comforted by these familiar walls of her room and the soothing touch of her own fresh garments, she stood regarding him. It was as though for the first time she had energy to think or care what he was like.

She saw a man a head taller than herself, though she was of medium height, heavy and thick-set for his years, but still spare from his privations. Wide above the ears, a little square in head, but without the flat Teutonic back to the skull. He had the high Norman nose of his ancestors, and below the small clipped moustache a wide, rather thin-lipped mouth that still held boyish curves of misplaced idealism.

Even as she made her inventory his mind was troubled. Four days ago she had killed two of his men. Four days ago the ivory fore-sight of a Mannlicher had covered the exact spot where he had fastened the emerald clasp.

She gave a little nod as though in approval of what she saw, then touched a rough patch on his tunic, applied by the awkward needle of Private Jones.

"Marie will mend," she suggested. Then, "What is your name?"

He told her. "Hugh" she could manage, but "Fitzharding" . . . smilingly she acknowledged defeat.

From downstairs came the strange notes of the hunting horn which served as call to mess. Fitzharding opened the door, averting his eyes from the emerald clasp as she passed through. Then side by side upon the wide curving steps, the mistress of the chateau and its recent conqueror went down to dinner.

BOOK TWO: The Woman

CHAPTER III

"WELL, Geoff Shillito," The girl in the big chair by the window aimed the words at him as though she were pointing a gun. "I don't know what's brought you to Chicago. But since you're here, and you are Ann's only living relative, you've got *to do* something."

Geoff dropped into the deep cushions of the divan and waited in resigned silence. For three days, ever since he came, he'd realized that this roommate of his sister's had been trying to corner him, get him where she could speak to him alone, and though he could guess a little what would be her self-appointed mission, he knew that it would be hopeless to try to explain to her that he had now nothing left in the world which would be of use to Ann, impossible to make her understand that, apart from his lack of cold cash, even he himself was of little use.

The girl bit off her thread, stabbed the needle into the chair arm, and gave him a glance of disapproval so sharp it was almost dislike. "If you want to know," she said flatly, "and even if you don't, Ann's trouble is mental. And it's serious." Her mouth tightened; she drew a sharp breath. "Ann's plain psychotic—funny in the head and on the way to going downright mad. Now do you get what I've been trying to tell you?"

Geoff stirred restlessly. "Well, what of it?" he asked. His eyes took in the large pleasant living room with its clean, faded chintzes and the bright climbing ivy plants that wreathed the empty grate of the old-

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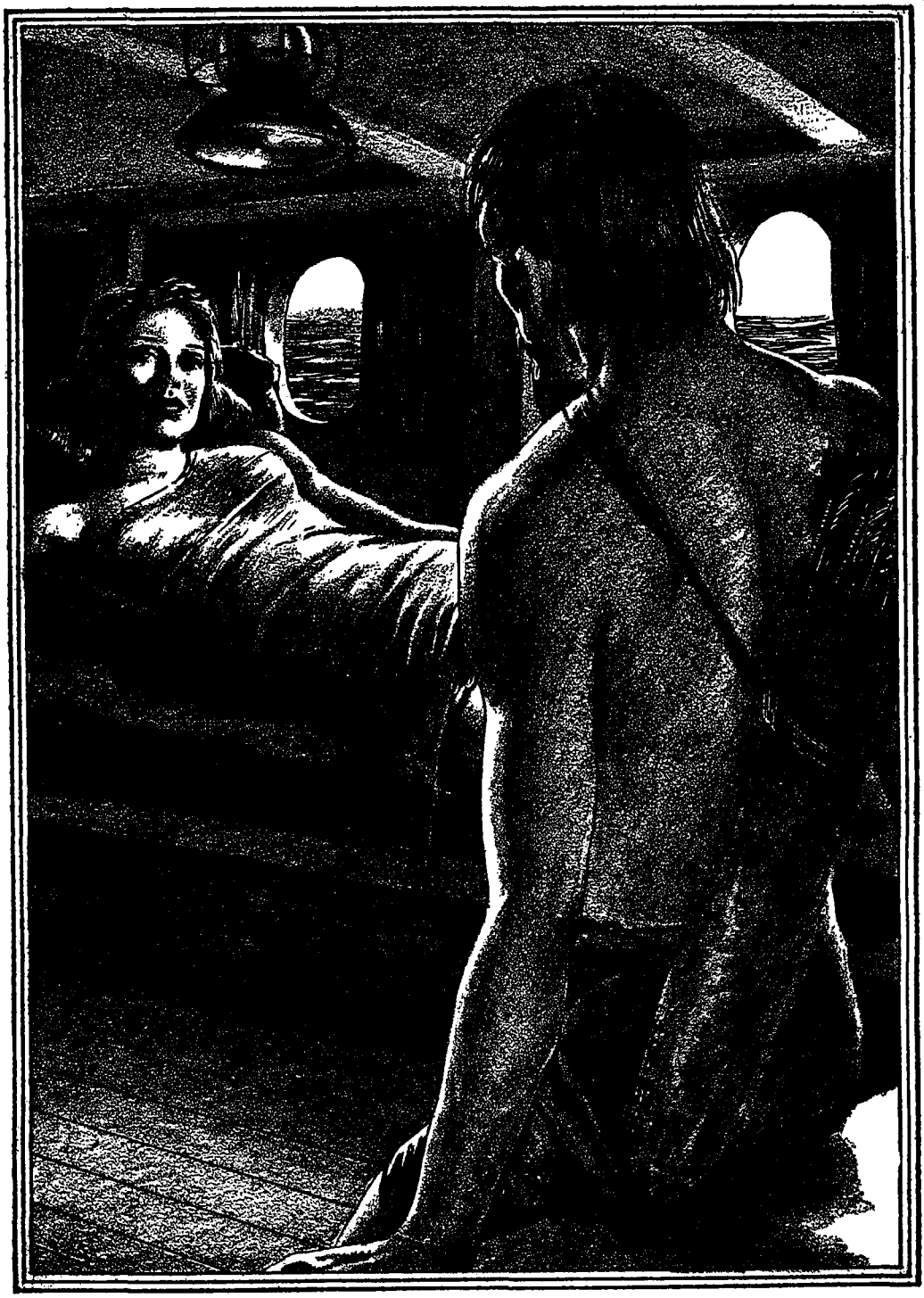

She made no attempt to escape—in fact, she lay there in an attitude of exaggerated repose.

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fashioned marble fireplace. Five stories below an occasional car whirred along Michigan Avenue, but the curtain blew pleasantly in the soft breeze and there was little sound from the city. These days, with gas at five dollars a gallon and still rising in price, even a big main street like this was almost country quiet.

"Besides," he added soothingly, "with the world in the mad state it is today, a woman partly mad should fit in better than one wholly sane." Ann had no right to leave him here, abandoned to the clutches of this earnest female, while she went shopping. Of course he could have made a bolt for his own room, that tiny hall bedroom which Ann had loaned him for a few nights' lodging, but it was too late now to do it with diplomacy, even with politeness.

He had come a long way just to say good-bye to his sister, and his weeks, if not his days, were dramatically numbered. Dramatic for the patient, but for the specialist, who had diagnosed his case, it was no doubt a mere routine prognosis. Back in Baltimore, almost ready to cast off her moorings and raise sail, was an old but seaworthy thirty-footer. A bit unwieldy, perhaps, for single-handed cruising, but in these topsy-turvy times the small craft cost more to buy than the big ones. It was only the cabin cruisers and steam yachts that you could purchase for a song. This was the most practical craft he could acquire with the remnants of his savings, and now he'd have to ask Ann for his rail fare back east. Good old Ann! It hadn't been possible just to fade out of her life without seeing her once more, without telling her good-bye. O Lord, that girl was off again!

"Of course," she admitted reluctantly, "you can't blame Ann. She was normal enough when times were normal, before radio and press had us all worked up over the state of Europe. We took their fighting more to heart than they did themselves; the thousands of suicide notes published in our papers proved that. Thank heaven the President clamped down a censorship. When Japan, China and Russia started to go out of touch with us, and Europe followed. . . ."

Geoff closed his ears. He didn't need telling over again. A woman had published a novel. And a pretty poor novel it was. But it hit a moment when the less intelligent public was already hysterical over Europe, and over America's new depression; and it seemed to confirm their worst apprehensions. Starting with the recent slump, the author, thinly veiled as the heroine of the story, pointed out that it differed from the slump of 1929, as this time the Government was caught with an already expanded credit and a staggering internal debt. She clearly prophesied that moratoriums and currency inflations would play leap-frog over each other down the steepening decline to national bankruptcy.

An inevitable moratorium, followed by a slight currency inflation, had seemed to confirm the prophet's exaggerated fears. Then suddenly everyone was reading the damned book. And the panic was on.

LONG after the time when, according to the novel, this country should have found itself cut off from all contact with the old world, small boats were, in actual fact, escaping almost monthly from Europe and Asia, and bringing news. The American Government sent out several destroyers, a survey ship, a whaler and presumably other craft, which returned from their voyages of exploration and reported to Washington. But Washington was too busy with its own troubles to keep the people closely informed about the state of affairs abroad, and newspapers were hard to get. So by the time the book was banned, its snippets of past history, its few lucky guesses, and its wild prediction of the future had been amalgamated by the excited public into fact more solid than truth itself.

Atlantic and Pacific cables would go dead, so the book predicted. Well, thought Geoff, that guess at least had come true. Wireless news from abroad was already limited to amateur short-wave transmissions, growing fainter, more intermittent, like the S.O.S. from a sinking ship. And soon another prediction of the damned woman would come true; if it did not really happen someone would be sure to imagine it. Across the empty waters would come the last historic message: "Weak. Hungry. Turning in. Good-night!" And darkness, darkness more lasting than that of any night, would close over Europe and Asia.

Nine men out of ten believed it had already happened, just as did this friend of Ann's. No use telling them that news came in daily to the Naval wireless station at Washington, and presumably to other stations too. Gruesome, of course, but still news.

No use countering other predictions by pointing out that the United States of today had far greater resources than when the ancestors of the present panic mon-

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gers had first arrived, and that no man, woman or child need go hungry. No use telling people anything which was sane and common sense. America, still safe from the horrors of Europe, was destroying herself by the power of her overvivid imagination. At least she would die by her own hand, if that was any satisfaction.

Geoff opened his ears again. Ann's friend had reached her usual ending.

". . . so what we've saved and invested, and even our annuities aren't worth ten dollars of real money . . . and with the politicians in newspapers and on radio calling on us to 'sacrifice yourselves upon the altar of the America of the Future' and the comet only last month. . . ."

O God! So Ann's friend even believed in the comet as an omen. It had been slick work of the damned novelist to ring in the comet. Of course the astronomers had predicted it long before. But the novel had given first news of it to the public. That was rotten luck for the country, as the journals were simply holding the news until it was nearly time for the star or whatever it was to flash across the sky once more. Of course it had been visible through telescopes the last time, but this was to be its first appearance to the naked eye. When the ordinary newspapers released the news, followers of the lady novelist accused the newspapers of stealing from the book.

When the comet actually appeared, it was visible, as the astronomers knew and the novelist had failed to realize, in Europe, and not in America. Angry mobs stormed newspaper offices which had been honest enough to say that this would happen. God only knew the motive of the rioters, whether they thought they were in some hazy fashion showing faith in their prophetess, or whether they were avenging themselves upon the newspapers for depriving them of the comet to which they had a right. Quite fantastic.

As fantastic as the true story of the little novelist, a country schoolmarm who had written herself almost blind and into complete breakdown trying to correct the damage her first novel had done. Six books in two years, and innumerable pamphlets, none of which her followers would read.

". . . why Ann's psychosis is understandable. In these days . . . when *she* develops this horror of children, a real unbalanced hatred of them, she's heading straight for trouble. Real trouble."

Geoff, considering the cigarettes on the table, rejected the idea. Smoking would certainly start his cough. God. . . . What to say to this female?

Ann, he admitted slowly, shouldn't, of course, be in her present job; pediatrics had been her choice. But when their parents died and money had started on its long toboggan to worthlessness, in something like panic she'd snatched at the nearest and safest profession. Already half trained as a doctor she had found short cuts, though less than she'd hoped, to qualify as a nurse. In those days she'd been mad about children, really keen on childhood diseases and the care and cure and training of youngsters.

Of course, he admitted, she'd overworked; if he had been less occupied with his own troubles he could have made her take decent vacations. But the doctors had shunted him out to Arizona for two years, and as soon as he was back to work the old trouble returned. Mildly he brought all this to the girl's attention.

She looked up to nod partial understanding. "But that's not it, Geoff. There's nothing to stop Ann taking a holiday. She's well off, ridiculously well off for a professional woman. Why, she's the only friend I have who's managed to keep her car; her wealthy cases insist on it, and are prepared to pay. But some day that subconscious of hers is going to whack back at her. Of course she's too well trained to be of any danger to the babies in her care. But some day a child will run across the street in front of her car, and eyewitnesses will report that she had plenty of time to brake or swerve, but just keep right on. And she won't have any defense except that her mind went blank. There'll be a trial for manslaughter, medical testimony, and the psychiatric ward. And cases like that don't get out again." Her hands were shaking above her needle as she laid them in her lap.

"What's to be done, then?" Geoff could see that she at least believed what she had told him. "Psychoanalysis, I suppose, and . . ."

"Marriage," said the girl. "Any good psychoanalyst would tell her that inside she's just as normal as anyone else. She's built up this hatred of children, and of men, too, just to repress her perfectly normal desires. Do you know that, outside her job, you're the only man she has spoken to for at least a year? Haven't you any friends, men friends, of course. . . . Ann's attractive, she's a . . ."

She was certainly convincing, disturb-

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ingly so. Geoff moved unhappily. "But isn't this all a matter for Ann herself?"

The click of the key in the Yale lock sounded and the door from the narrow hallway swung open. Here was Ann.

She glanced at the two conspiratorial faces and with a cheerful laugh dumped her packages and handbag on the couch. "So our Ann's to get married." She swung into a skillful imitation of her roommate's manner.

She dragged off her hat and tossed it among the parcels. "Only, my dear mentors, it is not more children we want in this world. But less! So that countries won't need wars of expansion, so that countries won't need bigger battalions for those wars, and with the bigger battalions and populations, yet more wars of expansion. As for me, I'm through with it all—I'm getting out!"

"Okay," said Geoff, and waited.

Yes, Ann seemed right in her reasoning. But her manner was wrong, unhealthily excited.

"Well . . . assuming all this, what do we do?"

Her smile came back again, slowly, but good to see. "Thanks, Geoff, for that 'we'. I was counting on that. In that bag," she nodded toward the couch, "is all the money I had at the bank. Not much, only my savings for the past six months. The rest was wiped out by the last inflation. Now I'm going to spend the afternoon fixing up with my agency and the doctors about my cases.

"There's a girl I know who's just as good at the job as I am. And by the way," she turned to the girl in the window, "our lease here is up in June. I'm leaving money for the rent until then and you can sell my furniture for whatever it'll bring as compensation for any inconvenience."

"But . . ." said the girl.

"Say . . ." said Geoff.

"And while I'm doing this," Ann went on, "you two hunt through the place, not forgetting the trunks in the basement, and take out anything Geoff and I are likely to need. Make a pile of them in the bedroom and I'll sort them out as soon as I'm clear of the 'phone calls. Here's the car keys, if you want to put suitcases inside. The car's waiting at the curb."

"But . . . " said Geoff, a little louder this time.

"Tonight," Ann got up and touched his cheek lightly in passing, "we drive toward Baltimore. There, if nobody in the meantime has inflated our meager currency to the vanishing point, we'll spend what we have in trade goods, foods, sails, anchor, compass and your other nautical toys. And then . . ." her hands spread wide in a gesture of freedom, "why, we'll . . . simply . . . sail."

BY NIGHT the pot-holed roads were empty, except for commercial vehicles with such goods as could be made to bear the heavy cost of gasoline, oil and spares; by day there were only the few luxury cars carrying the new plutocracy, the profiteers of inflation. Scientists, artists, musicians, the professional classes and people who would normally be living on their lifetime savings, they and all others not occupied with the sale or production of sheer necessities, could no longer afford even a short trip by rail. Inflation, after its first tonic effect, had thrown ever-increasing numbers out of work and had added to the vast cost of government. That had to be supported by more inflation which caused yet greater unemployment. Planned at first, it had become an uncontrollable force, and, ever gathering momentum, it rushed on till no human power could stay it.

Swiftly, through small towns and cities where dejected people sat with bowed heads on their doorsteps, they drove. No work to be done, the ready-made amusements to which these people had become accustomed were now beyond their power to purchase, or had already vanished. At other times of the day the doorsteps would be empty and long silent queues would stretch down the street from the government soup kitchen.

It was halfway through the second day that Geoff, his turn at the wheel ended, sat up with a jerk of dismay. "My God, Ann! We can't sail, after all. I'd forgotten. You've got no passport!"

His own passport and visas for foreign travel had been granted only on a life-and-death certificate from a doctor. Even that was for the insular possessions of the United States only, places for which, in past years, no papers would have been required.

But Ann, humming happily at the wheel, refused to be appalled. "I suppose you've got all the clearance papers for your boat?" she asked with a sideways glance. "Everything properly in order? And the President's coming down to see you off?"

Geoff's amused grunt expressed rare brotherly admiration. "Smart of you to guess. Of course I've nothing of the sort;

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such things can't be had any longer. I was counting on slipping out some night, and on avoiding any of the West Indian official ports of entry, anchoring off little fishing villages for provisions."

"Well, what's the trouble?" said Ann. "If you can hide a thirty-foot boat, you can hide a five-foot-six sister."

"Criminally minded, every one of them." He seemed to muse aloud. "Women, I mean." But there was sense in what she said. The sea was likely to be even more bare of traffic than the high roads, since tourist trade was nil and cargo traffic not worth the gamble now that the currencies of the world chased each other down the decline. And nobody would be troubled to police such empty seas, for government ships, from revenue cutters upward, waited in harbors with skeleton crews, unable to afford fuel, repairs or the crew of full commission. Last year's taxes, even before they were collected, were almost worthless. And what was true of ships, government or commercial, was yet more true of planes.

Paint was lacking on the houses they passed, garbage was uncollected and streets unswept; not everywhere, but with depressing frequency. Four-track roads had reverted to three, two and even one-track, where winter frosts, washouts or other causes had broken the surface. Sometimes these hazards were barred off, but often not. No warning lamps were hung at night. One important bridge was down, but they had heard of that before they reached it. Discontented miners from the Pennsylvania coal fields had blasted it as a threat to a powerless government department. The detour was well posted, though the bridge itself dangled unrepaired.

The streets of Baltimore stood emptier, more silent than those of Chicago. Strange vehicles, resurrected buggies and ancient traps, an occasional mule-drawn wagon showed, Geoff thought, the beginning of what might be a trend toward adaptation to the new conditions. People, quite obviously, were returning to the land, to try, no doubt unskillfully, to raise the food which their money could not longer buy. It might be a new and hopeful beginning from which a generation or two hence, people trained to hardness and economy like the first settlers, would re-create their lives and re-establish government on a surer, more stable footing.

"Our ancestors lived on the land, and the land is still there," he said aloud.

Ann, strangely, seemed not to care. "But we're too numerous and too feeble nowadays. And one nation can do nothing. It'll take the combined nations of the world to solve what are now world problems. How are they going to get together when each one preaches its superiority to all others?"

Then they came to more immediate considerations; what should they do with the car? Today the ability to buy gas was a sign almost of millionairedom, so certainly no one would steal Ann's old Chrysler. They parked it in a side street until they could borrow a dinghy and under cover of night ferry their suitcases out to the *Nirvana*. That night they slept on board to save the soaring price of lodgings, breakfasted at their own swinging table and went ashore, this time in their own dinghy.

The old five-and-ten-cent store, now proclaimed in fresh paint, "Five and Ten Dollars, Nothing Higher." But within the entrance a cardboard poster gave what was called the "ratio of the day." Goods purchased in terms of dollars were added up by the sales clerk and multiplied by this daily changing ratio. Ann asked for the manager, and, displaying a couple of bills of large denomination, stood out for bargain terms. Even the prices she extracted were enough to make a buyer groan.

GEOFF, following her around with loaded arms, whistled at the cost of two gross of blue and red-handled knives, one gross of necklaces in bright beads, half a gross of egg beaters. "I'd do better to go to wholesalers," Ann admitted to him in a whisper. "But the sooner we up-anchor, the better." And of course it would have taken a score of wholesalers, probably in all four corners of the town, to supply the miscellaneous stock of goods which they collected that morning.

The more expensive the article, the less its price had advanced, proportionally, which was a slight comfort, when, in the afternoon, they shopped for larger items. Hand-sewing machines, hurricane lamps, oil table lamps, mincers, hardware of every sort they bought here and there from different stores, left near closing time, transferred to the car until dark and then rowed out to the boat. Next day, to save at least middleman's profit, they drove to a wholesaler in the outskirts of the town for quantities of canned goods. At last, agonizingly anxious all the while lest someone should have gone aboard the *Nirvana*, with their last dollars they stocked up with fresh provisions from a farm.

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As to the reasons for the purchases, Ann had allowed each storekeeper to make his own guess. The lady was starting one of those new cost-price eating houses. That accounted for knives, forks and sundry oddments. Or . . .

"Had a legacy, Miss? You're wise to put it into food-stuffs." Or, "You-all aim to plant these here taters?"

In each case her smile seemed to confirm the guess and allay suspicion.

But the sextant, navigation tables and the indispensable charts were sheer largesse from a suddenly benevolent providence. They could be needed only for a foreign cruise, so any attempt to buy them would almost certainly start awkward questions, even bring the attention of the port authorities down on the owners of the *Nirvana*. Yet they were essential.

It was nearly dusk of the third day and they were unloading cans of foodstuffs from the car into the dinghy. Several times they had passed that morose little man at the quayside, seated on a bollard, his faded yachting cap cocked at a jaunty angle amusingly at variance with the old young face beneath it. Gloomily he was regarding a big cabin cruiser, streaked with rust, that lay in the water below. He turned suddenly to Geoff and asked: "Want to buy an engine?"

This was not a serious offer, he explained, for the thing certainly wouldn't fit the *Nirvana*. What he wanted to do was to pitch the engines overboard, and use the spare room for his two children. An ex-playboy, sportsman, it appeared, deserted by his wife, without a nickel for fuel, and with only one desire left in life, to get one last crack at lights and gaiety. New York, he mourned, was dead. But what he'd give to reach Buenos Aires in time for the Exhibition next month. . . .

The sextant, nautical almanac, a tattered Bowditch's American *Practical Navigator,* the pilot charts covering the Atlantic seaboard as far south as Trinidad, four volumes of *Sailing Directions*—Geoff could have the lot. Why, for nothing, of course, they just cluttered up the cabin. And the chronometer too, perhaps. Geoff could get it going again and get some use out of it. And a last friendly word of advice. "If you're up-anchoring to dodge the harbor dues, don't trouble. Nobody's paid for a full year. All you get's a sheriff's writ tacked to your mast. We've all got 'em. . . ." His lugubrious countenance lightened slightly. "They're a kind of club pennant."

At the last minute they changed their plans. It would be folly to invite suspicion and perhaps arrest by trying to sneak off at night, when they had every right to drop down the Sound as far as Norfolk, for a sail, or for the sake of fishing. But sleep that night was impossible. Ann spent the hours until daylight in unpacking her new housekeeping toys, and began to stow them so that at least there would be room to turn around. All the way from Chicago, she and Geoff had checked and re-checked the long list of their necessities.

Their scrutiny of Baltimore store windows had afforded further inspiration; a few extra cooking utensils, a patent pressure-cooker which couldn't spill when the *Nirvana* changed tack and besides was very economical of fuel; even a little stove which would burn wood or charcoal when they reached the Islands. The last was Geoff's idea, as he had been there before. It came in very handily now, its smoke-stack out through a port, for burning the excelsior and cardboard packing. There were regulations against fouling the harbor, and anyway, to dump the stuff overboard might lead to some awkward questioning.

The chain and sail lockers held additional hawsers, lines and canvas. Aft of this the forward cabin was choked with provisions and trade-goods which overflowed past galley and lavatory into the main cabin. All needed careful inventorying before they were stowed and lashed down in preparation for open sea. At least a dozen times during the night either Geoff or Ann would glance up from their labor, whisper "Sh . . . h!" cock heads sideways to listen and steal out on deck to identify some disturbing sound.

Just before dawn Ann prepared and served breakfast. At a more reasonable hour they appeared on deck, yawned and stretched to impress any chance onlookers, and copied the other maritime residents with bucket and swab. At last, able to bear suspense no longer, they raised sail, slipped their moorings, and with the dinghy trailing languidly behind, stole off seaward into the eye of the now strengthening sun.

They were almost the only yacht to move upon the waters, for the new plutocracy had little taste for the sea, and also dared not leave its profitable business. But cheerful little rowboats already rocked softly in the swell. Natives, in companies of four and three, feet and fishing lines trailing over the gunwales, had learned to turn their long unemployment into a per-

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petual holiday. They must go home at night, but a mess of fish would ensure them a welcome, and if they caught nothing today, why, there'd always be tomorrow.

The breeze freshened slightly from the northwest, and Chesapeake Bay opened wider and wider before them. Ann, discarding the formal garb of a professional life, appeared in tennis shoes, one of Geoff's most disreputable sweaters and a brief pair of shorts. Dangling her legs over the coaming of the cockpit she hummed contentedly, and balanced a little screwed-up package in her hand.

Suddenly Ann gave a nod as though of agreement to her unspoken thought, and ducked into the cabin. Returning, a gamin gesture of thumb to nose challenged the land they had so recently left. Then with one decisive sweep of her hand she cast the package that she had brought up, far out beyond the dinghy, into their ship's wake.

As the screw of paper opened in the air, a dollar bill followed the bright glint of coins into the water of the outer bay.

"Oblation to the gods, or a gage of battle?" Geoff crooked a knee over the tiller and fished in the empty pockets of his stained gray flannels as though wanting to follow her example.

Ann looked troubled for an instant, then smiled. "Nothing as serious as that. More of a challenge to doubts and uncertainties and the half-hearted fool that felt them." She flung wide her arms, and took a deep breath of the freshening breeze, in an attitude unconsciously histrionic. "And maybe a bit more besides; assuring myself that I'll never need or see the stuff called money again, a vague feeling of burning my boats behind me."

Geoff grinned widely. "For Pete's sake don't burn this one; it's the only one we've got. And now, if the lady passengers will kindly duck to avoid the boom, we'll come about and make a little easting to carry us clear of land and let us set a course direct to the Islands."

CHAPTER IV

IN THEIR teens Geoff and Ann had sailed on, or over, much of Lake Michigan and in everything from canoes to iceboats. Later, before this breakdown, Geoff had found time for such week-end racing as was within reach of his job in New York. Given reasonable sailing weather, this run down to the Islands should be no great adventure. And, as it happened, sailing conditions remained perfect.

Ann cooked, kept house, did duty as deckhand, took her trick at the tiller, even found time to regret that she hadn't stocked up on cigarettes. But that had been intentional. Geoff mustn't smoke, or for that matter drink, as it put more strain on the remaining lung. Geoff shot the sun, each day worked out their position, and once announced an error in computation to the startled Ann by the words:

"In five minutes we should be in Oklahoma City." He started to tinker with the chronometer, found all that it needed was winding, set it by his watch and tried to find means to determine by the sun its daily gain or loss. Whether overhauling each detail of the sloop, or inventorying and restowing their stores and tradegoods, he seemed to be having the time of his life, ever browner of face, his blue eyes seeming each day more blue. It was impossible to realize that he was under sentence. Ann caught herself believing that, after all, the doctors might have been mistaken.

They gave Key West a wide berth, dodged all the navigational problems by keeping well outside the Bahama Islands, and now in the latitudes of the steady trade winds made their first landfall at Puerto Rico. Geoff was jubilant over the combination of luck and navigation which had brought them straight to the mark. He had been this way before, in the idleness and luxury of a steamer stateroom, but this time he had to consider tide and prevailing winds. Since the *Nirvana* was seaworthy, Geoff had only to rub up his rusty knowledge of navigation and pilotage to take them wherever they wanted to go. So in the end it was the avoidance of government officials which determined their course.

Geoff knew a small island, St. John's, one of the lesser of that tropical group named after the Eleven Thousand Martyred Virgins, had ridden donkey-back from end to end over its mountain tracks and had particularly liked its gentle-spoken, part Danish, part Negro natives. "The Government House for the island," reported *Sailing Directions*, "is located on a small peninsula in Little Cruz Bay." And Little Cruz Bay was at the western end of the island and dangerously close to the once busy port of St. Thomas. So they dropped anchor among three locally built sloops in Coral Harbor near the eastern extremity, lowered the dinghy from where

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she had been lashed on deck and rowed ashore.

It was Ann's first sight of the tropics; a blazing sun struck back from water as blue as lapis, as green as jade, throwing up waves of heat from the coral-white shore where they beached. Yet the air was cool and the palms rustled softly with a fresh trade wind. So picturesquely, ridiculously tropical was the palm-fringed shore line, one expected a Treasure Island hero, or a maiden in grass skirts to come stealing forth between those giant trees.

One looked for nothing less adventurous than the Jolly Roger flapping from the masts of those small stained boats that dipped and curtseyed in the crescent harbor. Oh, why did people stay cooped up in Chicago, New York or Baltimore? Why didn't half the population of the United States empty itself into a place as lovely as this? Hastily Ann quenched the thought. How dreadful it would be if they did!

Inland the wide low valley opened westward to rich dark pastureland and a few small farms. Stone ruins, castle-like, on a low knoll, were, Geoff explained, the remnants of an old slave owner's mansion. To right and left two steep hills garbed in virgin forest rose a thousand feet into the sky, with a zigzag ribbon of gray track disappearing into the tunnel of trees, as though in shy avoidance of strange visitors.

An old Negro woman, her head wrapped in a handkerchief and topped by a flapping, torn straw hat, her still slim and upright body covered by a faded, high-necked cotton dress, gave them greeting from the porch of a two-roomed cabin in the little hamlet of Emmaus.

Ann smiled and stopped to admire the garden, then took courage to explain her need. She wanted vegetables, fruit, even meat if possible, and went on to regret that prices were so high in St. Thomas. The mention of St. Thomas had been Geoff's suggestion. Let the story go round that they'd come from the town of Charlotte Amalia, port of entry for all these islands, and an official who might hear of them would not bother to investigate.

Huge yellow-green mangoes, the flesh around the peach-like stone golden and honey-sweet, and ripe, dark-green alligator pears; Ann could have all she wanted of those. The old woman had a washtubful of fruit brought only this morning, she explained, by her grandson, from one of the deserted plantations. She fed them to her pigs. And there were vegetables, such as her small garden would produce. But anything in exchange? No, not a needle, not a spool of thread would she accept.

SURPRISED and touched at such generosity, Geoff and Ann returned, loaded, to the dinghy, dumped their gifts, then set out again in search of meat. Here, however, they met failure; meat was of course too valuable to bestow as a gift, and all the half dozen natives whom they asked refused to trade. This included the young spectacled man in the one-room caddis-house of a shack, who dispensed kerosene, island rum and cloth. Back in the *Nirvana* they were still frowning their puzzlement as a local sloop, wide-beamed, stubby of mast, swung in and dropped a ludicrously tiny anchor at the end of a huge rattling chain. Before her mainsail fell, Geoff noted its many patches and a more recent tear.

"Here's where I have a try," he said, and disappeared below, came up apparently still empty-handed, dropped into the dinghy and sculled casually across to the sloop. Ann sat watching in amused interest.

The captain-owner, a square-faced black man with a mop of white, rope-like hair, pulled in the jib, shouldered the boom onto its crotch, then squatted at the rail to talk with his passenger or one-man crew. Geoff's dinghy scraped alongside and standing up he passed something up to them too small for Ann to see; something which the captain received with exaggerated care. There followed a long discussion, friendly on both sides, two or three stories, perhaps, by Geoff, for the black man's mouth split wide in toothy amusement. Suddenly captain and crew began throwing fish into the dinghy till Geoff held up his hands.

"A sail needle," said Geoff on his return. "Now can you figure out some method of smoking these fish? Pickling, dry or wet, will use up too much of our salt."

That evening, playing piquet in the cabin under the gimballed lamp, they reverted to the people's strange reluctance to trade, when they were willing to give. Of course no one could expect the inhabitants of Emmaus to kill a whole pig in order to sell a few pork chops, but they had chickens. Their refusal to barter felt somehow like a rebuff, the more noticeable by contrast with what was otherwise so kindly a reception. Geoff and Ann agreed that perhaps they were too sensitive. But a small reverse at the outset of their new life

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might be a warning of graver difficulties to come.

It was not so much the problem of meat as of their relations with these people. Had Geoff and Ann unwittingly offended them? If so they must find out straight away and amend their clumsiness. But not until after they had broken the smooth deserted surface of the water with their evening swim; not until they were lying on their hard bunks hoping in the darkness that an off-shore breeze would not bring mosquitoes did Geoff call, "Ann? Awake? I think I've got it."

The explanation which he suggested went back a few hundred years to the days of slavery. In those days, when the Caribs had been wiped out, and the land was held by Danish plantation owners who had power of life and death over their unhappy Negro slaves, mutilation and torture had been common punishment of minor offenses. Even much later, when a system of touring magistrates was established, the estate owners still maintained their private prisons, shackles and manacles.

In fear and desperation slaves sometimes escaped to the wooded hills, to be hunted down like wild beasts, except that beasts are granted swifter, more merciful deaths. Overseers, unbalanced by excessive rum, misused their Celtic imaginations in devising sadistically diverting punishments. Risings occurred, were repressed with maniacal cruelty. Until one day a concerted insurrection swept the whole island, slaughtered every hated white man on St. John's.

The horrified Danish Government felt that an example must be made, an example which would deter all other slaves on their islands from ever daring to lift a hand against the white man. They called upon the French, most merciless of all colonizers, to do what even the tough Danes and English had no heart for. Painstakingly, French soldiers, sailors and civilians combed the island, turning each wounded or captured Negro into a thing to shudder at. Until a bare few score of fugitives found themselves cut off on Mary Point on the north of the island. Two hundred feet below a calm blue sea lapped invitingly on the rocky shore; behind them followed their inhuman persecutors. Men, women and children gripped hand to hand so that none might at the last moment flinch. Then faster, faster down the slope, some already carried off their feet . . . the cliff top . . . a shout of triumph . . . one last leap. . . .

Ann gasped. For a moment she had been there on the cliff, a helpless eyewitness.

"The islanders don't like talking of it even today. And their feelings must be mixed, as most of them claim Danish blood, and many were left their property by later Danish owners when slavery was abolished, profits on sugar ceased and the Danes went back to Denmark. But I think we've got to take past history into account in our future dealings."

"But they were *so* pleasant when we went ashore; and so generous with their vegetables and fruit." Ann's voice was distressed. "Oh, dear!"

"They'd be generous to their worst enemy. But they may not want to establish trading relations, if refusal is likely to make us up-anchor and leave. Another factor may enter into it, their shaky title to most of their land; I heard that the last time I was on St. Thomas, from a Government man."

"But the man who gave you the fish. . . ."

"May be a stranger like ourselves; may not have looked on it as a trade, but merely as obliging a brother shipmaster. Or may not own land he's afraid of losing to intrusive white men."

There was silence for awhile in the dark hot cabin. Then suddenly Ann burst into violent, almost sobbing speech. "Damn history! Damn men and women! All we ask is a little food, a little drink and a little happiness. We come to this perfect spot, are welcomed like friends, and back of it all is cruelty, hatred. We haven't any enemy on the island, and we wouldn't harm a soul. But all the same. . . ."

"Don't take it too keenly, Ann. It's only a guess of mine, and may be way out. Anyway there's nothing we can do about it tonight. Let's try to get some sleep, and tackle the difficulty again in the morning."

But Ann could not sleep. Geoff might take it lightly, but optimism was a recognized symptom of his complaint. Perhaps subconsciously he had the comfort of knowing that all would soon be over for him, all the whole sorry mess that was called the world, which she must live in and face. If only, like those poor devils on Mary Point, she could link hands with him and jump. . . .

Then her mood changed. She had been weak, selfish, to let herself go like this. She had come on this roving voyage as much for Geoff's sake as her own, to help him through those last lonely weeks, or, at the best, months; to turn whatever hap-

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pened, *whatever* happened—she insisted to herself—into a gay adventure. And when the tinselly play was played, and the last smile painfully smiled, and not till then could she think once more of Mary Point, Mary Mother of Mercy's Point, link hands, and. . . .

A slow swell from the Caribbean Sea rocked her, pleasantly tragic, to sleep.

NEXT morning, sprawling comfortably on deck, sunning herself, Ann suggested that they try another island. One of the French or British group might be willing enough to barter. Geoff, searching the pages of Bowditch for the simplest means of checking his chronometer by sextant reading and known position by the map, demurred with a grunt. Then, closing the book, he condescended to explain some of the difficulties in Ann's plan.

In foreign waters their American speech would betray them. Tourists simply didn't exist, these days, and they might be taken for spies. And their passports and ship's papers would be the first thing police would ask for. They hadn't seen a daily paper since Chicago; they hadn't so much as a portable wireless on board; that ever-threatening war in Europe might actually have started and involved the United States. Anyway none of the democracies stirred a man or gun to defend their citizens abroad, so that they would have no possible redress if the *Nirvana* were seized and they were thrown into an internment camp.

"No." He summed up the situation. "Sorry, Ann, but there's only one course open to us, to establish a sound footing on this island. We may have to hang about for months, and go vegetarian or starve. But somehow we've got to make friends and convince the people that we're utterly harmless. Once we've developed a good friendly base to which we can return, we're free to go sailing. But we've really got to have our base for supplies."

So they spent the day ashore, apparently loafing, but actually with ears, eyes and minds sensitized to receive the slightest impression. As at first, the people were kindly cheerful in their greetings. But now it was easy to detect the deep reserve which lay beneath the friendliness.

On their return, at Ann's suggestion, they dragged the mattresses out of the bunks and laid them on deck. Supper eaten, and their few dishes washed and stowed back in the racks, they rigged their mosquito nets and crawled into bed.

Talk failed, for neither wanted to revive the worries of the previous night. But stars shone down with as much brightness as full moonlight in Chicago, and the trades sighed gently round the slope of Fortberg Hill, played softly, coolingly, on bare outflung arms.

In another moment, Ann knew, she would be asleep. With pleasure at the effort it required of her, she called, "You awake?"

A sleepy answer from across the deck.

"Just wanted to say. . . ." She could not bother to find real words that connected together; Geoff would understand. "Worth coming all this way . . . for . . . oh, just for this!" A quite invisible finger waggled at the black outline of hills, at mast and standing rigging swaying slowly past the stars.

Hope, not merely contented resignation, renewed itself next morning. Geoff remembered that on the farther end of the island, where he had stayed before, the natives had paid him the compliment of accepting him almost as one of themselves. He was sure that after his absence they would welcome him back with warmth. But there was that infernal Government post. Then he slapped the deck with his bare palm and sat up.

"I've got it, Ann. Aunt Sabby. . . . She's a Chicagoan, like ourselves, and owns a quarter of the island. Since the hurricane wrecked her house she lives alone in a rickety wooden shack all plastered with texts. She's the link we want, to sponsor us."

So Ann removed their mosquito nets and all other tempting portables from the deck, and locked up, while Geoff paid out more cable and took other nautical precautions. For the high price of two bars of yellow soap they rented two donkeys and set off up the western valley at what the donkeys tried to sell as a canter. Geoff reported between bounces that this first mile was the only bit of level going, and after that would come trails so steep and broken that they might even have to dismount and drive their animals. If you wanted to reach a place only two miles ahead, on this island, the chances were that you would have to climb five miles over the mountain on your left, or swing ten miles around the hill on your right.

Ann laughed, but did not care. She loved the *Nirvana,* but after so long aboard it was like a holiday to be free from her for a few hours and on solid land. Between showers of light rain that cooled the air,

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but scarcely penetrated their thin shirts, they made good time along the wide weed-grown road, once a carriage-way, then swung north, and at a scrambling walk zigzagged up to the hogback of the island.

A flash of luminous, incredible blue showed through the trees. It was only the sea, a mile away to the north and a thousand feet below, yet seeming to be within touch of the switch which Ann had plucked from the roadside to encourage her mount. Blue appeared on the other side too, way off to the south, but just as vivid, just as. . . .

"Geoff! Look back there at that tree. The gin bottle, the calabash and bits of cloth."

"Offerings to evil spirits. You'll find 'em all over the place. Our Northern Christianity adopted the pagan gods of the North, as you know. Down here it took over a lot of the African gods and customs. Of course teachers and preachers are all against them but. . . . We turn down here. . . ."

AT LAST they tethered the docile little beasts beneath a brush of thorny mimosa close by a bay on the south side of the island and scrambled among the ruins. Scraggy chickens and a number of black pigs ran out, like dogs, to welcome the novelty of visitors. The small unpainted wooden shack was neat and bleached by wind, sun and salt until the outside seemed as though scrubbed. And from the open window leaned a white-haired mulatto, reproving with a "Doan do dat, Maan!" the grunting, squealing piglets. She pushed up the cracked spectacles on her wide well-cut nose, and seeing the strangers, greeted them in the pleasant dialect of St. John's, which, with its rising tone to stress the penultimate syllable of a sentence, has something of the singing quality of Welsh.

Once recognized, Geoff was warmly welcomed. Ann, once established as a fellow Chicagoan, was offered a broken rocking-chair cleared of a yellowed pile of missionary journals. So they'd come all the way from Coral Bay to see her? Well, Maan, that was mighty kind. She'd got a sister livin' there but didn't see her once a season.

And Aunt Sabby, talking steadily, bustled around, sweeping the table clear with a broad brown hand, setting thereon a box of crackers, a bowl of dark honey in broken comb which she ladled with a calabash from a galvanized iron tub in the corner, which must have held nine or ten gallons. A magnificent carved mahogany four-poster with a rotting mosquito bar took up a third of the room, and a collection of ancient trunks, above which hung a line of wilted garments, a large share of the remainder. Raising some stained newspapers in the corner, Aunt Sabby cut off hunks of what appeared to be pork and, still chattering, went out to add them to the pot. So they were expected to remain and dine.

During the meal Geoff stated their problem. Aunt Sabby adjusted her cracked spectacles, paused with a large spoon near a well-toothed mouth, then set it down decisively. "No, sir, yo' ain't kind o' folks kin set up tradin'. You listen to Aunt Sabby or you goin' starve." And they listened.

In the midst of her advice the rain came without warning, driving six hens and two small pigs within the shelter. And the rain, so the old woman decreed, made it necessary for them to stay the night.

Two days they remained there, eating till Ann doubted if the donkeys could carry them, and only with difficulty got away on the third morning, their ears still buzzing, with descriptions of their hostess' long-lost, and by now quite fabulous, Chicago. Though the solution of their problem had seemed no nearer than three days ago, on their return they found themselves suddenly adopted by Coral Bay, particularly by the woman of whom Ann had first asked fruit and vegetables and who turned out to be Aunt Sabby's sister. Aunt Sabby had intervened in their behalf.

Within a few days Ann had traded a set of three knives and forks to Aunt Sabby's sister for a leg of newly killed pig and a vague credit which might mean the liver of the next victim. But she warned them that they mustn't expect pork with any regularity, as nobody butchered until he had sold most of the meat in advance.

Aunt Sabby's sister worked on a system of verbal credits which would have been impossible for the Americans; she knew her market and its separate needs, from a frying pan to a few spools of bright embroidery cotton, or a cheap necklace for a birthday gift. If Ann needed a chicken, she had only to mention it, and Aunt Sabby's sister ran through her list of debtors, and sent a small grandson out to collect the hen.

Incredibly the system worked, and Ann and Geoff, freed of all care, bathed in the clear waters of the reef-bound bay, basked on the sunny deck, occasionally summoned

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up sufficient energy to carry a picnic lunch into the hills, fished, admired sunrises and sunsets, counted the eternal rainbows and remarked to the point of absurdity, "Gosh, this is the life!"

With the coming of the hurricane season Geoff watched the ship's aneroid for signs of danger; the Residency on the other side of the island would receive storm warning on the wireless telephone, and the government plan was to send one of the military planes from Lindberg Bay at St. Thomas to drop signal maroons over each isolated settlement which was likely to be in the course of the cyclone. But in the four months since their arrival, they'd seen only one plane, so it was clear that they would have to depend upon their own precautions.

They off-loaded their goods into a small deserted shack belonging to Aunt Sabby's sister. They'd be a little safer there, should a hurricane strike with force. But the season passed and they continued to float placidly on the smooth waters of the bay, their contact with the outside world no closer than through an occasional scrap of newspaper wrapped around a chicken.

"They's no more nothin' yo' can sell here," Aunt Sabby's sister advised them one day. "Not till folkses loses or breaks the things they's bought already." But she did give them a list of friends, some of them distant relatives, all the way from near Tortola, to far Antigua. They then called in sufficient of their outstanding credits to provision a voyage. And if they followed her advice they could make a profit on the side, taking St. John's vegetables to barren Tortola, exchanging them through a friend there, for goods to be taken to another island, taking advantage of the difference in prices due to high customs barriers.

Barter might be more primitive than selling, but each deal was the equivalent of both buying and selling, a double transaction with chance of double profit. So, setting forth again, they bartered when they could, and only when this was impossible did they establish a credit with one of Aunt Sabby's many relatives or friends. It began to appear that the two of them were earning a living and no longer eating into their trade-goods capital. This, Ann saw, was imperative, if what she hoped were true.

It was Geoff's condition which aroused the new hopes. He was no longer losing weight, as far as she could judge. Though pulling the dinghy against wind and tide when they landed at St. Croix had been too much for him, the ordinary daily work, and it was heavy, seemed to cause him no distress. If their life or the climate allowed him to hold his own against the tubercles, then this ability to earn a living was essential.

When a shipload of cocoanuts had realized twenty small kegs of very raw rum, Geoff's conscience began to prick. "Ann, this is smuggling."

"It always has been," Ann pointed out, "since you sold that first sail needle at Coral Bay." The only difference was that they were now doing it efficiently, getting to know people's needs, taking orders for return trips, even keeping books. And of course they had broken the laws, the immigration laws, of at least four major countries.

Geoff gave it up. "All right, then. But we'll draw the line at piracy, if you don't mind. I've only the vaguest notion of the technique of marooning, and I haven't a spare plank to walk any victims."

"I'll fix all that," laughed Ann, "when we come to it."

The trips were long, now, and the work hard, as they wanted to get back to St. John's before the next hurricane season. The small boat had never been designed for cargo carrying, but was now crammed with strange merchandise. Ann still managed to squeeze into the cuddy to cook, but they lived, ate and slept on deck between crates of squawking chickens, or it might be ducks and vegetables, or, on another voyage, oddments too varied to catalogue. Swabbing and scrubbing would get rid of one smell, only to make room for another equally exotic. But they were making money, or more exactly were establishing credits in some dozen or more out-of-the-way villages. And further to establish "good will" for the business, they executed errands and carried an occasional hardy passenger.

The game could not last forever. Some day the world would regain sanity, reduce the prohibitive tariffs, and the demand for smuggled goods would cease. That would take half their trade away. It would be worse still if governments became stable and financially sound once more so that they could send out revenue cutters and coast guard planes. Ann and Geoff discussed what they should do for a living if the world suddenly became sane. Ann scouted the danger. Geoff, more hopeful of human nature, wanted to be prepared.

How long, even in the conditions then

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prevailing, they could have kept up their secret flitting from island to island, working their way by night into little out-of-the-way coves, Ann up in the bows armed with lead or sounding pole, they were never to know. Disaster of a kind they could never have foreseen came suddenly and unannounced.

On that final trading trip they ventured farther south than they had ever done before, and heard there rumors, unverifiable, of war "out 'cross deh"—apparently in the Old World. They could have got further details and confirmation of the story by making contact with someone of their own race, but they did not think it worth the risk. War had been a regular condition of life in Europe for years.

SOME days later, dropping in for provisions at a British island, they found the three huts in the lonely cove lifeless, apparently deserted. In the morning still nobody. So they filled their fresh-water cask and up-anchored. It seemed probable that their prospective customers were on the farther side of the island, attending a wedding or a funeral, and might be gone for days.

Barely out of sight of the land, while Ann was below cooking the eggs and cornmeal mush for breakfast, Geoff made out a large naval vessel straight ahead upon their course. It would be safest, he judged, to keep straight on, and behave perfectly naturally, as no cruiser, if the ship were a cruiser, would bother with a dirty little thirty-footer manned by a couple so brown that they could pass for natives. When a light squall of rain made it uncomfortable to breakfast on deck, he came up into the wind, lashed the helm, and went below.

But breakfast over, there was the cruiser, still broadside on, still in the same relative position. Puzzled, Geoff set the *Nirvana* on her course again, reached for the telescope, and called Ann from her dishwashing.

"Can't make her out. She seems to be drifting without even steerage way. No bow wave, no wake, no smoke, not even the usual condenser water that pours out through the plates of a steamer even in port. Though maybe a naval vessel only drains out below water line. I can't remember."

"And no shimmer of heat above her funnels, or sight of anyone on deck. We're near enough to see that now," said Ann, handing back the glass.

Geoff sheered off as widely as he dared. "Of course," he said, "you can't expect the crew to be sitting in steamer chairs. But all the same, there ought to be some sign of life."

"She couldn't," said Ann thoughtfully, "be a casualty from some sea fight, could she? Bombs or shells would have done more obvious damage, and a torpedo or mine wouldn't leave her on an even keel like that." She was curious, and had the *Nirvana's* owners been more clear of conscience, they would have swung her up under those massive bows, slowly rising and falling to the swell.

As it was, one wild guess was as good as another.

It was barely lunch time of the same day when, hugging a coral reef to avoid a three-knot current, Ann handed Geoff the telescope and took the tiller. "Looks as though we're late for the party. And what a humdinger of a party it must have been!"

Geoff, peering through the glass, could make out men and women lying flat on the beach, clear against the white sand. Occasionally, one struggled to rise, unless that was an optical trick of the heat waves, and another waddled drunkenly down to the end of the short stone jetty, a woman, apparently, and catching sight of the boat she waved wildly before collapsing back into a sitting position.

Curiosity and the dawn of a vague uneasiness made him turn, that afternoon, to another bay. But he put the *Nirvana* about when they saw the bodies fringing the shore line, lapped by the ripples. Not even the raw island rum or square-face gin would make a man crawl to the sea to drink. And of these, none stirred save that one, its feet still on the shore, its body now rising and falling gently with the ripples that lapped upon the blazing sands.

It was farther north and at another island the next morning that their doubts became certainty. Here the plague must have struck a day or so earlier, for the soft, moist trade wind bore an unmistak-

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able stench of death and corruption, yet sharp and rank, still in its early stages.

"It's not bubonic," said Ann, "it's not yellow jack, not anything I've ever heard of. None of them give this overpowering thirst."

Geoff was thinking along another line. "The island where we put in for water, we didn't go into the huts or search the other beach. Two other islands—it's spread over a good two hundred miles."

"And the cruiser—" Horror grew in Ann's eyes.

"God knows how far that came, but they had it there too."

"People don't visit from island to island every day. That accounts for one lot being dead and the next just dying." Little fishing sloops, as they knew, went from bay to bay on business and on pleasure. Without official quarantine and innumerable government vessels to enforce it, the epidemic, obviously man-borne, must spread.

Thereafter they abandoned any idea of trading and went short on fresh food and water, one thought only in both their minds, to carry warning to their friends at St. John's, organize a rough cordon sanitaire to defend them.

Ships of all kinds, rust-streaked from long waiting in harbor now gave the Caribbean the busy appearance of old times. Ten, Ann counted, not including the three which seemed to have driven ashore with engines at full speed ahead with a dead man at the helm. Lifeboats and a dinghy, their remaining occupants bloated and stinking, added to the flotsam. Bodies in lifebelts floated beside the boats. There were pieces of wreckage from one or perhaps two planes. This litter of craft had fled from ports on the mainland. Therefore the plague was on the mainland too, in the United States and even South America.

Ann tried to understand. "It seems years ago, but Geoff, do you remember one of the dictators, the paranoiac, not the hysteric, threatening that his minorities in foreign countries had been furnished with a weapon against which no weapon could prevail? It was in his famous diatribe beginning, "We know our destiny. We will not quail though all the democracies of the world. . . ."

Geoff, skirting each new wreck wide to the windward, looked pinched about the nostrils. "Disease germs, d'you mean?"

"Oh, why didn't people believe, why didn't they know in time?" cried Ann.

Yes, the method had been simple. "Give us all that we demand, or. . . ." And then, when their unreasonable demands were rejected, the silent, cowardly murder of millions. Geoff came viciously about on the other tack. "God! how I hope they're all hunted down and slaughtered, like the plague-carrying rats they are."

A pall of smoke hung over the once busy port of Charlotte Amalia. It told its own tale. Fire following plague.

Ann was biting her lips with anxiety as they dropped anchor at last in Coral Bay, lowered the dinghy. Halfway to the shore Geoff rested on his oars and called.

In the silence a goat bleated. That was all.

CHAPTER V

THERE was nothing they could do, nothing anyone could do for the people of Coral Bay. But Aunt Sabby in her isolation might have escaped so far, and might be warned in time. To avoid unnecessary risk they tacked out of the bay, rounded Ram Head, and hunted out her little bay among the dozens of others which seemed identical, on the south side of the island. Dropping anchor outside the reef, they manned the dinghy and sounded their way to within two hundred yards or so of the shore. Geoff waded in, while Ann at the sculls held the boat against the breeze and fended off coral heads.

Ann heard Geoff calling at first, but after a time he was silent, and after what seemed hours waded out again with a sack of fresh fruit and a few eggs. "No trace of her. She may have visited friends and died away from home. I gave her livestock another feed, and loosed the tethered goats so they won't starve." He settled to the oars, leaving Ann to stand in the bows to pilot. "I don't think the papayas and eggs can carry contagion, but if you say so we'll pitch them overboard."

That evening they returned to their usual anchorage, and in the morning rowed closer inshore and hailed. The landcrabs were already busied with what lay huddled at the waterline. Over the little hamlet of Emmaus lay silence . . . only silence . . . the new silence of emptiness they were to know so well. Then slowly, reluctantly, overwhelmed with horror of the disaster, and with sadness at their own personal loss, they up-anchored and left the once friendly little village, the charming, still beautiful bay.

They had no data on the pestilence, and could only guess that it was more likely to

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be air-borne like pneumonic plague than water-borne like cholera, or carried by parasites like bubonic. How long would contagion cling to the noisome beaches, or the deserted huts? They debated, but could form no opinion. Would it affect birds or beasts?

In the Narrows between St. John's and Tortola drifted a cruise steamer, which stank from afar like an old-time slaver. With this exception the seas appeared to be cleansing themselves, or perhaps currents and the prevailing trade winds were driving the plague victims back to the mainland whence the plague had come. For a fortnight, without the shred of a plan, they cruised around the island, touched Tortola, stood off and on opposite the large town of Charlotte Amalia on St. Thomas.

The port still reeked of putrescence; the town behind still smoked. In smaller settlements the landcrabs showed them how swiftly in the tropics human wreckage can be made to disappear. But where they were forced to put in for fresh water, cocoanuts and plaintains, they chose uninhabited coves, and stole from deserted plantations. And each day, each visit confirmed and emphasized their first dread. They were alone, as far as they could see, in a now uninhabited world.

They could not go on cruising forever. The problem of supplies alone prevented that. Yet they dreaded having to turn to Coral Bay. So instead they ventured into Caneele Bay on the northwest side of St. John's. Not a local sloop nor a motorboat of trader or Danish West India Company lay at the usual moorings. All who could have obviously had cast off and fled, to die at sea. Greatly daring, Geoff and Ann followed the track up the promontory to the south, looked down into Cruz Bay and with the telescope scanned the windows and veranda of Government House in the old whitewashed Fort. No movement. They scanned the shore, the cabins, the trails that vanished over the other hills. Young goats came out to frisk on the foreshore; hidden somewhere among the palms and lime trees, Geoff thought he heard a cow low as though she still needed milking. Later events disproved the cow's existence, but the donkeys were real enough browsing undisturbed on the rising ground back of the settlement. That was all, except for the hummocks on the shore, no longer recognizable as humans, and still covered with the usual writhing mass of landcrabs.

They retreated, silent and unhappy, to Caneele Bay. There, by some trick of wind and tide, the shore was clean. No sign of life around the neatly painted bungalows which the D.W.I. had built as a cross between hotel and tourist camp, in the days when cruises still visited the islands. And both Ann and Geoff agreed that it was safer to leave the houses alone.

With armfuls of fresh fruits and a few vegetables, they retreated to the *Nirvana*, and the question arose: "Where next?" One place would be like another. As well make fast to the deserted moorings as put pointlessly out to sea. Their plan of life had gone and it seemed as though their motive force had gone with it. They bathed, shrinkingly at first. They played endless games of piquet. They started to say, "It might not be a bad plan if we. . . ." and ended with an inane, "But perhaps it would be rather pointless." Until after many days, Ann was inspired to say:

"Geoff, we're simply rotting at our moorings! Anything is better than this."

IT WAS nearly a month before they summoned courage and energy to make their second visit to Cruz Bay. Then they searched the Government quarters, intact even to the wireless telephone set. Geoff started the motor, spent a day anxiously trying to get communication. But calls by Morse key or microphone brought back no answer, no human voice. Even the ether was silent.

Then, sitting in comfortable chairs on the shady veranda that faced the sea, they held council. The whole island was theirs, to go where they would. They could live here if they wished, in this very house, sleep once more on spring mattresses and enjoy all the comfortable adjuncts of civilization around them. But neither wished to. The smell of death had gone, but the feel of it still haunted the settlement. The farther they could get from once human habitation, the better.

Then Geoff recalled a place named Fisherman's Rest, a house built of stone with wooden top and verandas, to the west, on the third bay along the northern shore, halfway to Mary Point. It had never been a home, just a club for business men who wished to week-end from Charlotte Amalia, so it had probably been empty when the plague struck. But there should be the remains of a garden, lots of fruit trees and room to start their own vegetable plot, taking seed, roots and cuttings from wherever they would. The *Nirvana* would

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be safe if they left her anchored here in Cruz Bay.

Action of any kind was a relief. They returned to the boat, rolled a few necessities into blanket packs, followed the shore road that Geoff remembered, and at dusk reached their destination. Here stood a two-story building, perhaps the largest on the island, roughly furnished and with pots and pans, firewood and even a stock of kerosene for the lamps. In the big, untidy living room were three decks of soiled cards, and, ironic blessing, literally stacks of cheap news-and-picture magazines in both Danish and English.

Here surely was help for them, answer to their questions; here in magazines of the past six months should be some clue to the events leading up to the plague. Geoff and Ann fell voraciously upon them.

But for all the real news of the world that they contained, American, Danish or international, they might have been published by a photographer who could neither read nor hear the spoken word. There were the everlasting bathing beauties, the new champions, tennis, golf, football, table tennis, or some new game called Hogie Pogie that seemed to have run like an earlier plague through the civilizations of the world. Here were the inevitable Alphabet Babies, successors to the earlier Quins, and symbol of the great Exposition of the Universe that would have been about to open, unless the pestilence had forestalled it.

Everything in this magazine world was made to seem bigger and brighter, nobler and more beautiful, more skin, tooth and hair-appealing, than it was in dreadful reality. From advertisers and editorial writers to artists and photographers, all emphasized their pathetic belief in the excellence and permanence of the civilization of which they were a part.

Geoff and Ann, sitting at the rough table beneath the lamplight, too anxious even to have stirred toward preparation of supper or of beds, brushed away flying insects, flipped the pages slowly, glanced up and, meeting each other's eyes, suddenly flung the papers into a corner. These pages filled the night with ghosts, shades of excited, frantic little humans who had once possessed the power to shape the world, but had not known what shape to make it.

In the morning the specters had vanished and the world was emptier still. But work, hard work, lay comfortingly before them. Ann, struggling with a balky stove which probably called for charcoal but could only be fed twigs, scouring pots and pans with an old rage and handfuls of sand, sweeping, dusting and rearranging, had plenty of distractions, and a pleasant morning free from major worries. However, if she paused for a bare moment, the silence of the death around them crept in upon her.

Geoff, plunging about in the undergrowth on the land side of the house, hacked away with a machete and from time to time called out to the high veranda for advice, or shouted his discovery of another tree or overgrown bush which was worth saving. The vegetable garden they had hoped to find had long since been abandoned, and left no trace or outline. Geoff shaped out a handle to fit a rusty hoe head, and with new-born ambition began at once to grub the ground which his machete had opened up.

AFTER lunch they bathed from the rickety wooden jetty, and only when they were sunning themselves later noticed a large grouper prowling in the water below. Was a grouper dangerous, like shark and barracuda? They weren't sure, but laid plans for his capture by hook and line. On their return to the house, their noses sharpened by the salt water, they made a new, and possibly important discovery. A strong, almost sickly smell of honey which spread throughout the upper rooms led them outside again, to gaze upward at three dark-stained holes in one of the clapboard walls, through which innumerable bees buzzed in and out.

That was all that Geoff could do that day. Ann noted with sharp sudden fear how tired he seemed after the morning's unaccustomed labor, and how thin he was, though the poor diet of the last few weeks might account for that. In the past her concern had been for Geoff, and not for herself, but now this concern was no longer altruistic. Life might be hard, would be hard, even while he lived. But when he had gone, existence would be intolerable. There would be left no living soul to whom she could speak, no use for the human language, none to come to her rescue if she broke a leg, none to help her if she fell ill. A castaway might at least watch the horizon in hope of a sail; but how, if in all the world there were no sail?

Remembering her views of only a month or two ago, Ann grew angry with herself. Then laughed, both at her anger and its cause. When the world was full of people, she was tired of life, and but for Geoff,

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would have been willing, even eager to resign it. But now some fundamental change had been wrought in her, not by reason, but perhaps by the plague's mass massacre. Now she wanted to live, and feared, not life, but the new horror, loneliness.

In the tangle of uncertainties one thing at least was clear. That at all costs she must save Geoff from over-exertion. "See here!" she put it to him sternly. "We've got to economize on energy. That's one of our main tasks. There's a huge job ahead of us that's going to be extra hard because it's quite off our line and we won't know a single short cut. So we've got to think up and use every labor-saving device the island can supply. For instance, you've just been saying there's no safe anchorage for the *Nirvana* off here, and you're going to pack the stuff across by road. Don't let's be such nuts! We'll round up some of the donkeys at Cruz Bay and let them work."

No arguments there. Geoff had to agree. "If we start right away, and the burros are amenable, we could just about make it and be back before dark."

"But not today." Ann was firm. "I'm tired, and besides I want to get the house in working order, and make a note of our needs." That was a mere excuse, of course. "You smear yourself with kerosene against mosquitoes, and go sit on the end of the jetty and catch that grouper before he catches us. There're lines in the corner of the veranda."

A fair beginning, but she could see that tact was a technique she would need to practise and develop.

The donkeys were far from wild, and raised their heads, as though hungry for human contact. Two bridles were extemporized from light rope, and pack-pads made from two canvas kit-bags part filled with grass. The little beasts drove easily, stopping occasionally to browse, so their slow pace made the return journey an amusing, lazy stroll. Taken in all, the day was as close to a holiday as their consciences would now allow them, and Geoff looked less peaked at supper that night.

To lighten Geoff's burden required, Ann saw, that she must take more upon herself. Feet and fingers must learn to move faster, and she must teach herself to cook outdoors while she gardened, mend clothes while they sunned themselves, for Geoff's health, on the jetty; try, like a juggler, to keep several balls in the air. Trade credits on different islands had died with the debtors.

Their remaining tradegoods, some on the *Nirvana*, some still at Coral Bay, were no longer convertible into food. For the present they could rob the deserted gardens at Cruz and Caneele Bay, and try to find an occasional nest of hen's eggs before the mongoose had smelled them out. But after those resources had been utilized, their only meal-tickets would be hoe and machte.

So thereafter she rose before dawn, crammed every minute with tedious slogging toil in house and garden, until she ached all over as though with fever. She decreed an early bedtime for Geoff on the plea of saving lamp oil, and learned to slip quietly from her room to prepare the morning's vegetables on the starlit veranda, or visit the night-lines on the jetty to make sure that a change of tide had not entangled them among the timbers. At first the only compensation for all this effort was the brief but indescribable bliss when her tired body stretched out upon the bed and her eyes were about to close in toil-sodden slumber. Later, by painful purchase, came the joy of her body in the actual doing, in the toil itself; not merely in the relief and triumph at having done. And from no better cause than fit muscles and physical health began to grow a tentative and quite irrational belief in some future for herself and Geoff.

She used innumerable stratagems to make Geoff rest, if only by change of occupation—anything to make him carry, without his realizing it, the lighter end of the load. There were days when the carelessness of fatigue or impatience with such feminine trickery made her method too direct and obvious, bringing her near to discovery.

"Look, Ann. You can certainly drive a nail for yourself. What's the sense in calling me from the garden for all these pottering little jobs?"

And, to add to her troubles, the number of stupid mistakes that could be made by a woman who thought herself reasonably intelligent seemed endless in this new environment.

HER first attempt to herd some goats from Cruz Bay had been a farcical failure.

It had been easy enough work to round up four, complete with kids, and drive them gingerly to within half a mile of home. At that point luck had changed, and they had bolted, two up the side of the thickly wooded hill, and two with their

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young leaping blithely down an almost precipitous cliff toward the sea. By dark she was still climbing after the first pair, and had to slide and slither home by moonlight, the precious energy of an entire day completely wasted.

Then there was the first garden. They had planted it both at the wrong season of the year and in too salty soil, choosing a patch of ground which, though dark and rich-looking, was encouragingly free of heavy growth. The torrential rains of late autumn washed most of the seeds right out of the ground, and it was clear that the salt in the soil, though they did not discover it at once, burned up the seedlings as soon as they had sprouted.

Then there was a further disappointment in which both garden and goats combined. Ann had caught a new lot of goats by means of a cunningly spread salt-lick, and had managed to drag them home from Cruz Bay along the narrow path now slowly encroached upon by wild thorn brake. The goats, triumphantly tethered, had managed to eat their tethers, but instead of running away had stayed to devour the most hopeful of whole rows of painstakingly transplanted suckers and cuttings.

Failures such as these did not happen all at once, nor add up to a noble tragedy which would justify the relief of tears. They spread themselves along throughout the whole first year, pricking each bubble of complacency as it formed, mocking each cautiously modest hope.

At what they judged to be the anniversary of their arrival at the Fisherman's hut, Geoff suggested a holiday, and Ann decreed a Thanksgiving Dinner. They had no turkey, of course, and none of the traditional fixings. But they did have a chicken, much fruit, fish, and vegetables which the island and the season allowed, and a real loaf of bread, from sweet-potato yeast and almost the last of their flour. The flour was growing musty anyway.

It was a day of stock-taking of all their possessions, from garden to goats. For the first time it seemed that they had made a little headway. And the next year would call for fewer time-wasting journeys to Cruz Bay and even far-off Coral Bay, hunting for roots and fruit and greenstuff among tangles of weeds and thorns. Next year their own garden would begin to yield, and, saving them such journeys, would allow more time to extend the garden. In another year, if gods and hurricanes permitted, they would be nearly self-supporting as far as foodstuff was concerned. There was no anxiety about their simple tools, which would last for many years. And as to clothes, Geoff already spent most of his time in shorts and shoes, and Ann wore little more.

As they stacked the dirty dishes in the primitive sink, and, sighing gently with repletion, betook themselves to deck chairs on the cool delicious veranda, Geoff began to build dream castles of the future. They would save some of the wild heads of millet and maize, and grow their own corn. Sugar cane would be easy. They would rebuild—he admitted the difficulty but airily dismissed it—a neglected windmill whose stone tower still stood near by, on Hognest Point. They would grind their own flour, crush cane, boil down syrup. They. . . .

Ann smiled encouragement. No matter whether they did these things or not, the ambition alone was valuable, an attractive frosting to spread upon their laborious, unappetizing days. And watching her brother, rested for the first time for months, dressed up in shirt and trousers in honor of the occasion, and stimulated by his enthusiasm, she began to believe that there was another cause for thanksgiving. For the first time, and still doubtingly, she felt that Geoff was holding his own in another and more personal battle. He had lost no weight that she could see, coughed less frequently, and seemed no longer to be physically distressed by moderate exertion. One lung had ceased to function back in civilized America, but the other she hoped might be healing.

Chill, hunger, strain, any sort of privation must always be guarded against. A hurricane, unroofing the house, destroying their food supply, might be exposure, followed by famine, bring on the final phase of his illness. And against such a blow of nature she had no means of protecting him. But no hurricane struck, either that year or the next, and Geoff's condition continued unchanged, in agonizingly precarious balance.

In the second year, long after the seas had emptied themselves of human flotsam, Ann, loading a donkey with shoots of sugar cane on the south side of the island, sighted a hull far out to the southeast. Geoff, gazing off in the direction in which she pointed, stood for a moment as though paralyzed by surprise, then cast the donkey's load to the ground and, leaping on its back, kicked it into a sharp trot and tore his way up the overgrown path which led back to Cruz Bay.

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A moment of dilemma. Should she follow on foot? The sails were in store at Government House and the *Nirvana* in no condition to put immediately to sea. Instead she rushed hurriedly down to the shore. There was dry driftwood of all kinds, and she had matches folded in a strip of oilskin.

From the shore line the ship was now barely visible. But by the time her fire was going and she was throwing on grass, green boughs, anything which would give smoke, the ship was surely nearer in.

They watched hour after hour, frantically feeding the fire. The ship was definitely nearer and seemed to be headed west for St. Thomas. A tramp, she guessed. No smoke issued from it, but it might be Diesel driven. Had it seen her smoke, and would it change course? Three hours at least, and the *Nirvana* on the southerly tack nosed out of Pillsbury Sound, held on her course to intercept the stranger. On . . . on . . . diminishing in the distance. By now Goeff with the telescope would have made out the ship's nationality, and even. . . . Good heavens, why was Geoff turning back?

A glance over to the southwest, and she guessed his reason. While she had watched the *Nirvana,* the stranger had made no headway, had turned beam on to her supposed direction. Indeed, only Ann's wild hopes could have turned that slow drift of a dead ship into a steered course. At dusk Geoff anchored opposite the dying fire and, when Ann swam aboard, confirmed the ill news. "No masts, no funnel, decks swept clean. Listed till her port rail's nearly awash. Just drifting with the trades." Hungry, and with a renewed sense of loneliness, they spent the night on board.

Next morning, as they stretched the sails out on the beach of Cruz Bay to dry out the last trace of dew, Geoff voiced their disappointment.

"I suppose you've been hugging some vague last hope, as I have. But it's no use. We can stay on the island, or go wherever the *Nirvana* will take us. But wherever we go it will be the same. There'd be us two, just us two and nobody else, until . . . until we grow old and die."

ON THE second Thanksgiving Day, Ann started a calendar. Not knowing what day it was according to the old calculation, she boldly beagn with Day 1, Year 3 of the Era of Desolation, and wondered how long the reformed calendar would run. The numbered grille hung conveniently at hand, and served as diary with penciled notes, such as: "Molly (goat) kidded today." "Ate first papaya of season." "Geoff caught nightmare fish." That was a fish so horribly repulsive that Ann would not allow it to be eaten, as tropical fish are sometimes poisonous. Geoff, on the other hand, contended that they were missing a treat, since only a thing uniquely tasty would need such protective ugliness.

The calendar also proved the regular sequence of days, though the impression they both received was of time that bolted, and time that stood still. Heavy routine toil, hoeing, for instance, seemed, when they were well in it, to stretch illimitably into the future, from far in their past, only, later, to be squeezed from memory between their more snsational triumphs and misfortunes. Routine formed a gray background to the days, and incidents alone lived on in recollection.

By Ann's suggestion, Geoff started periodic visits to make sure of the *Nirvana,* and to stretch and dry her sails to prevent their rotting. The donkey ride over to Cruz Bay was less strenuous than his usual tasks. It was Ann's idea too that he should experiment with different barks until he could discover a tanning or preserving process. It worked on part of a shirt, keeping off the mildew, and by test of time seemed likely to preserve it. So they both crossed to the bay, and put in days of hard toil, stripping the boat of every piece of canvas, every foot of cordage, tanning and drying, tanning and drying.

During this work they stayed at Government House to save the daily journey from Fisherman's Rest. Also they dared to use up some of the small stock of canned goods left by the last official. There should be more canned goods across on St. Thomas, and now that the third year had brought some easing of the pressure of existence the time had come to find out.

True, the port of Charlotte Amalia had been afire, but there should be something left; it would not be difficult to discover. An easy morning sail outward bound, and a more tedious beat back. Canned goods weren't their greatest need; Geoff needed a file to sharpen the saw, and several other tools, and Ann was at her wits' end for cloth; cloth to serve as dusters and dishrags, cloth to repair the deck-chairs, cloth even to cover their bodies.

They could raise their own foodstuffs, though the diet might be meager at times, but they would never have leisure to raise cotton, spin it and weave it. In despera-

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tion, as garments dropped away one by one, Ann had forced herself to enter the silent little cabins along the beach, but found that mildew, mice and cockroaches had left what cloth there was as fragile as old papyrus. But the cotton and linen in clean tight rolls in the storage warehouses of St. Thomas should be more enduring.

Canned goods to supplement their diet might mean everything to Geoff and lighten the incessant struggle to put by a store of surplus food. Already anticipating success, Ann expended some of their precious kerosene to start up the mechanism of the long-neglected ice box at Government House, and the night the sails were dry she served an evening meal, from mild cocktails through iced bouillon to ice cream made from canned milk, that made Geoff stretch out later on the swinging hammock of the veranda and exclaim: "Say, this is the life!"

Where had he said that before? Oh yes, in those long-ago days when they were escaping from civilization. Before civilization had escaped from them.

They planned to start for St. Thomas early in the morning, as soon as there was light to judge the passage over the bar. And then Ann said:

"Can you possibly manage without me?"

Geoff jerked up in surprise.

Ann perched herself on the veranda rail above the water, a bare sun-browned arm around the upright. Behind her the afterglow blazed with fire, smearing the waters of the narrow passage with lavish color. The peaks of St. Thomas were brilliant violet against the sky. "It's hard to explain," she said slowly. "It's a kind of feeling. The canned goods, tons and tons of them, even though they lasted beyond our lifetime, would be just a luxury. Life's got to go on beyond us, Geoff. The sweet potatoes growing in our garden will go on. . . ."

"I don't get it." Geoff wagged his head.

Ann looked down at the water lapping below her, her cropped head with its rough hair bleached to a reddish tinge by the tropic sun so turned that he could not see her expression.

"It's something fundamental, maybe not rational at all, just stupid instinct a million years out of date. A man, or a man and a woman, for that matter," she said, "could get along on canned goods and live in a single room for the whole of their lives. To live, you've got to grow things, things which will go on growing in the future; you've got to build things, things which weren't there before you came. Not just let the past support you. We need all you can get in St. Thomas, need it desperately, I admit that. Yet somehow the things there don't mean the same to me as those stupid little sweet potatoes, the only things we've had any success with growing and which we get so sick of."

"You mean . . ." Geoff's voice was worried.

"I mean one of us ought to stay here on the island and guard the little bit of progress we've made. Because it *is* progress, not just standing still. And as I can't sail the boat single-handed. . . ."

"Okay." Geoff sounded relieved.

BUT next day it wasn't so easy. Ann, back in Fisherman's Rest alone, toiling even harder than usual with some idea of making up to Geoff for her desertion, felt that the island had grown suddenly empty as the world around it. She'd never been one to keep strings on Geoff; a sister has no right to anyway; but always before this she had known where he was on the island and pretty much what he was doing. If he'd fallen down a cliff and hadn't appeared for the next meal, she'd have gone to find him, could have reached him. But now, with the waters between, she would be helpless.

Oh, if only there were more than the two of them, if there were three of them, if Geoff had a wife, though a wife might be hard to bear, now they had been so close together and for so long. Hacking viciously at the garden weeds, straightening her aching back, mopping the sweat from her steaming face, she savored with relish the distracting ache and effort.

Next noon she was back in Cruz Bay, full of forebodings. Even minor accidents became grave in a friendless world. If Geoff broke a leg clambering among the débris of fallen houses, he might be unable to get back to the boat. And there was another picture which had built itself up into all but fact: that Geoff would get hot and dusty ashore, and want a swim, though not in that necropolis of a bay. That he'd wait till he was out at sea, come up into a wind and, without dropping sail, dive overboard. That the *Nirvana* with a lee helm would fall off, gather way and leave him. So it was a ghost ship which at dusk rounded the point and came up to her usual moorings.

"Starving islands ahoy!" Geoff's voice dispelled the nightmare. "Here comes the relief ship, loaded to her gunwales."

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She had brought two donkeys with panniers as arranged, but had a better idea than wasting a whole week tramping back and forth between here and Fisherman's Rest. Geoff could ferry the *Nirvana's* cargo around to a bay nearer the hut or, better still, they could store their stuff here in Government House. The thick stone cellars and prison cells of the old Fort beneath the modern bungalow would be the best possible protection against a hurricane.

Geoff poled the *Nirvana* in and made fast to the stone jetty. Ann loaded the donkeys. There was a trick to that; you hung a load to each side of each donkey, and the little beast continued to stand with patient drooping head; you put a load on top, and up went the bored head and the donkey started off as though suddenly recollecting an engagement. So she had to have her top-load of the second donkey ready, drop it into place, and rush off to head the first donkey away from the familiar track toward Fisherman's Rest.

"Glad you didn't come, after all," said Geoff as he broke open a case to identify its contents. "It was not exactly pleasant."

The whole fore-shore, he explained, had been covered with white and yellow bones, which he had to kick aside when he landed. The whole packed population must have rushed down the hillside in mass panic. The trading quarter had been almost burned out; most of the roofs had fallen in, either from fire or subsequent neglected repairs; plants were already splitting the walls, small saplings remorselessly tilting even stones and concrete slabs. Seeds dropped by birds had played as much havoc as though they had been small bombs. Geoff, looking around him, had found it hard to believe that all this destruction had been accomplished in less than three years.

Wild tuskers rooted among the débris, nosing the relics of their former masters upon wharf and shore. Places which still had roofs sheltered families of goats, and while Geoff had been standing, trying to decipher the faded shop signs, a hunting pack of mongrel dogs had swept up the street yapping, barking, baying. The youngest, unused to man, had smelt meat, but the leader, a tough, scarred old fellow, who might have been the bull terrier *cum* airedale which Geoff had known as a fellow visitor at the hotel, halted, puzzled at ancient memories, then swung his gang off to chase after some startled, squealing piglets.

THE stowing progressed rapidly. Cans stacked according to their size reached the ceiling of the prisoners' cells. Ann, rechecking each batch of goods, kicked at a carefully corded hamper, the kind once sold to tourists. "What's this?" she asked.

"A bright idea of mine, medical stores: iodine, bandages, toothbrushes, ether, all sorts of things, even splints, though I don't know whether they're the right kind. And there's a roll of canvas still on the *Nirvana*, short pieces I cut off new deck chairs; we can use it for patching sail. I tried to get you a dress or two; some of them weren't even faded, but they were tender as tissue paper. But there's some new cotton sheeting. I found a whole roll of it and the inside ought to be all right."

Another civilized meal that night, though a light French wine, hopefully cooled in the ice box, was found to have turned to vinegar. It was clear by now, as they discussed it, that if they cared to risk contagion, scarcely even a risk by this time, they could sail from island to island, load the *Nirvana* at every port. And the stuff would keep, at least during their lifetime.

Thereafter Geoff took a dozen or more such trips, he wanted more garden tools, nails and other gadgets. But never farther than St. Thomas, so that Ann would not be left alone too long. Then, to her amusement, he began to assume her own viewpoint, restated it in a slightly different way.

"Of course these stores are only stopgaps; they don't really get us anywhere. It's like mining, as opposed to farming; there's only so much stuff in a mine and when you've got it you've come to an end. But all the same, we'd better salvage all we can, while the *Nirvana's* canvas and rigging hold."

Now their improved diet, their pride in the ownership of stores so near to being inexhaustible, had renewed their strength and courage. Ann, looking at Geoff these days, hoped once more that the doctors had been wrong. Doctors often were; they could go only on general probability, not allow for exceptions. Geoff was holding his own, but how long would that last? Honest comparison with what he had been only a few years back forced her to admit that his strength like that of the *Nirvana's* rigging, could be nursed, but not renewed.

Their better-balanced meals, or the increased energy which was the result of them, caused Ann to patch together something nearer a real frock than she had

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worn for months. Geoff still kept up his habit of shaving every morning, safety-razor blades having been part of their trade-goods. But slowly they dropped back to more primitive ways; Geoff was garbed in a battered native hat of straw and a pair of ragged shorts that had dwindled from trousers and had a patched seat; Ann wore his hat or her own, whichever came first to hand, and cotton shorts partly supported by a halter.

Shoes were worn outdoors and as far as the bottom steps of the house, then kicked off; they'd both gone barefoot on the boat and the clean plank flooring of the house was like a deck.

The island had no snakes; long ago the Danes had imported mongooses to kill off the terrible fer-de-lance; and now they had all but exterminated the birds as well. Nor were there any dangerous animals, unless the pigs and the cattle of Coral Bay, in multiplying and going wild, had become vicious. But once Geoff, returning from one of his final expeditions to St. Thomas, found Ann frightened, or at least troubled.

"Something's been at the garden; not goats. I wish it were. But whatever it was has carefully pulled aside those thorny mimosa boughs we laid down as a fence, and just about cleared out the last of the papayas. It must have climbed to reach them." But here was the worst, and what had frightened her. "Its tracks were like a monkey's, and almost as big as mine."

Geoff could have told her more, but didn't. Just off the trail on the way up from Cruz Bay, the buzzing of flies had drawn his attention to something in the bush. A small pig, dead, and killed not by teeth or tusk, but what might even have been a spear wound in its side.

Ann took him out to show him the tracks of the invader. Her story was no figment of nerves and loneliness; so it meant, he realized, that his trips for further stores must be curtailed. The sight of the strange tracks led to another decision, to salvage barbed wire from around the deserted cabins, to build with it an elaborate fence, not only around the garden but extending past each side of the house to the sea.

BOOK THREE: World Without Men

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS toward the end of the fifth year, by Ann's count, that Geoff started his larger and more elaborate barbed-wire entanglement, with a knife-rest *chevaux-de-frise* for gate. It proved to be a far bigger job than he had contemplated, calling for weeks of collecting and coiling and carrying the rusty wire, which, however gingerly handled, struck back with poisoned claws and teeth, for weeks of post cutting, weeks of posthole digging. And when the job was nearly completed and they planned a trip to Cruz Bay for a gala dinner, a gash in Geoff's hand developed blood poisoning.

For three months Ann swabbed and fomented, the hand and arm getting worse till it made her ill to look at it, and putting Geoff into a fever that left him unwilling to eat, unable to sleep normally. There was a bottle of chloroform, not ether, as Geoff had called it; there were knives, needles, thread, even a hacksaw. Ann, in growing terror, made herself mentally rehearse each step in amputation, from sterilizing the instruments to bandaging the stump. In her sleep she could hear the grate of the saw on bone.

Then, quite inexplicably, the arm suddenly got better, and she nearly collapsed in sheer relief from strain.

As soon as Geoff could wander out and work again, she began to have nightmares. Not real nightmares, merely the continuation of her daytime thoughts. What would have happened had Geoff died? Could she, could anyone face a life of utter loneliness in a world devoid of people and with no least chance of rescue? Even when Geoff had been away for only a couple of nights she was forced to pretend that he was there, in the next room, to ask his empty chair what he would like for breakfast, to tell him that the birds had been at the seed again.

"What's the matter, Ann?" he asked, finally. "You don't sleep, you're losing weight, and you haven't smiled for at least two weeks. I know I was a damned nuisance when I was ill, but that's all over now."

She avoided a direct answer. She'd always told Geoff the literal truth and this was a matter that no man would ever understand.

But Geoff insisted. To gain time she said she was busy, would tell him that evening when the work was ended.

So, sitting on the wide veranda facing the bay, with the lamp turned low in the room behind them, on pretense of saving kerosene, but really to leave her face in the dark, she forced herself to fumble for words.

"It's empty, the whole world, I mean, as

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far as we know. Empty except for us. If you die, if I die, what happens to the other? No . . . don't try to answer. I just want to go straight through with the speech I have been all day in hatching." She tried a little laugh, but it wasn't successful.

"I'm thirty-four years old now. You're a year older. We have forty years of life before us. . . ." For a moment she closed her eyes to the ever-present ultimatum of Geoff's doctor.

"But when the end comes, what happens? In civilization there were friends, or relatives, money savings or insurance for nurses and attention or, at the worst, government charity. Tribes that were too primitive for this used to depend on their children. But we . . . neither of us will have any children, you know, for our old age."

"Pretty ghastly picture, and I suppose you're right," he said. "Only, I hadn't really thought of it because. . . . Oh, well, you know what the doctors told me." His tone was serious. "Of course my dying first would be harder for you than for me. Perhaps that's why I brought some of those things over from the druggist's. If it all got too hard the survivor would have a way out. I looked for firearms for the same purpose, but couldn't find any."

It was of death Geoff was talking. Not life.

She too had dreamed of death until there had been too much death in the world.

It was life, life that mattered now.

"Now if things get too hard for you, Ann, just say the word. I've got to finish before long, anyway, and I've already lived beyond my allowance of time. Old Heppelwhite, the specialist, was right in his fact, though wrong in his guess as to my time limit. So when you're ready, just say the word." His quiet voice was full of sympathy. "We'll go to Cruz Bay, have a slap-up dinner, drink and smoke all we want. . . . And how I'd love a smoke! Then, if you agree, we'll go aboard the *Nirvana*; somehow that's where I would like to die."

Ann found words impossible, her throat was too full. But after a moment she said, "That's grand, Geoff. And if we must, that's the way I'd like it, too. That way, or at Mary Point."

NOW that the garden was no longer of such vital necessity it seemed to grow everything, and of course their skill had increased. Geoff, cutting back the encroaching undergrowth from the road, swung the long knife, the machete, with a precision which both economized energy and gained greater results than his first clumsy slashes. Ann was keeping goats with reasonable success, had developed two excellent milkers, and others whose offspring with primitive efficiency had furnished roasts, stews, and even broth from what was normally considered offal.

Geoff's attempts to preserve their skins had been less successful. To keep the invaluable donkeys from going completely wild they held a roundup every few months, themselves mounted on the last two which had been kept in the home pasture, and drove the others into a corral of thorns and barbed wire, picked out the two that seemed in best condition, transferred saddle and bridle and loosed their first mounts to run with the herd again. Their limited skill would have made this impossible with the horses at Coral Bay.

The small donkey herd was breeding well, so well that to find new pasture they had to drive part of the stock down to another bay where the trees were already encroaching on an old plantation. The tough-skinned little beasts found no difficulty in breaking their way along the one-time road, and this gave Geoff a new system for keeping their own road to Cruz Bay clear of encroaching undergrowth. Thereafter, at each roundup, he and Ann solemnly drove the whole herd home and back again.

Chickens, which they had counted on at first as the easiest creatures of all to keep, had been less successful. True, they got a few eggs and a few broilers, but only through never-ending struggles with the mongoose, which stole eggs and fledglings. It seemed impossible, with such time and material as they could spare, to keep the marauders out, and Geoff's traps caught no more than one undamaged but deeply offended hen.

The lagoon swarmed with fish of all kinds, as brilliant and varied as rainbows, and already they knew, from their year of trading, which common fish were reputed edible and at what seasons. But any attempt at serious fishing, on a larger scale than with hook and line, met with failure. They were too late by years when they searched out nets in the deserted cabins and laid them on the beach for repairing. Dampness, small animals and insect life had so weakened the fibers that they seemed to dissolve as soon as the water

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touched them. With long lines supported by floats and carrying a dozen or more baited hooks, Geoff got better results.

In the seventh year the mechanical refrigerator at the Fort gave out and Geoff could do nothing to repair it; a part had just worn or rusted away. It seemed a serious loss, quite out of proportion to its real value to them; ice wasn't in the least essential to existence, but they'd formed a pleasant habit of going to Cruz Bay on festive occasions, dining with iced drinks, jellied bouillon and creams, a weird agglomeration of the luxuries lacking in routine daily life. So Ann invented other methods of signalizing birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, some thrilling successes, and even of lending encouragement after failure.

"You know, Ann," said Geoff one day, "we're really living the life of Riley, and half the time we don't realize it. I know a score of fellows who'd give their eye teeth to change with us." Then, at Ann's startled look, "No, I hadn't forgotten. But it's easier to pretend we're on a holiday of our own choosing, a long protracted holiday. Don't you do that?"

Ann didn't. But she could see his point. When, after struggle, you've reconciled yourself to an early death, and the Fates for some reason grant you a few years' glorious reprieve, a reprieve, moreover, beyond that of the remainder of humanity, you do your best, like Geoff, to enjoy every year, every month of it. And life was indeed good. She could feel it in her whole body when her muscles stretched to toil, when she splashed into the opal waters of the bay, bare from her short-cropped, sunburned hair to her brown toes, when she flopped with a sigh of bliss into her bed at night. But also in her body, as in her mind, was another feeling.

She forced herself to procrasinate no longer about this. Made herself set a definite evening for a talk, choosing place and time as a commander tries for strategic advantage at the opening of a battle.

IT WAS the same place, the same veranda as before. But four swift years had elapsed since her last attempt to explain her trouble.

Those years had gone swiftly; but for a woman in the tropics, four years were long. The strenuous life had left her body outwardly young. In another few years, though her slender suppleness should belie it, it might be too late for her purpose.

"You remember my roommate in Chicago, and her diagnosis of what was wrong with me. Perhaps she was right even then. Or perhaps it's only a more recent fear of an empty old age. Oh, not empty in the sense people used to mean; but in a way they could never have imagined. . . . Myself, perhaps, in an empty world! . . . There may be somebody left in Tibet, some Eskimos, perhaps, and South Sea Islanders on the fringes of the world. And we can hope for a visit from them in a few thousand years, when they've repeopled all the empty continents between."

She drew herself firmly back to the point.

"As I said four years ago, there's only one thing primitive people rely on, Geoff, for their old age. Children and filial affection. It's more than just someone to feed and nurse them, it's friends, voices around, and yourself going on into the future. It's been a religion, the biggest, most universal religion of simple people. Even after death the children are needed, whether to crack the skull of the father to release his spirit, or to set food and drink before it. We call ourselves civilized, but children are still the marrow of our being."

Geoff looked at her admiringly.

"Ann, you've got more courage than I would have thought possible in anyone, and I've been a coward. There's been something in my mind for years, now, along these lines, but I've been so fearful of doing it that I haven't told you; even though I knew that each year lessened the chance of success. We'll start work on the *Nirvana* tomorrow, and as soon as the hurricane season's over, I'll sail for the States, or what was once our U.S.A. I swear I'll get there if it's possible. It may be six months before I get back, but if I can find anything even vaguely human, I'll bring it back with me, male or female."

In the morning over the breakfast table, he said, "You know, Ann, that's a swell idea of yours, raiding the old world for husbands and wives. But you'd better lay down specifications. Supposing I dragged you home a kind of Italian professor, when all the time what you'd been hankering for was a Finnish long-distance runner?"

"Better bring 'em both, then I'll have a choice. And don't forget to run over my 'points.' Tell them I can shinny up a palm tree, corral donkeys, swing a mean axe, and have in fact all the genteel accomplishments of a *Godey's Ladies' Book*."

Thereafter Geoff was away for three whole days, ransacking what was left of the port of Charlotte Amalia for bottom

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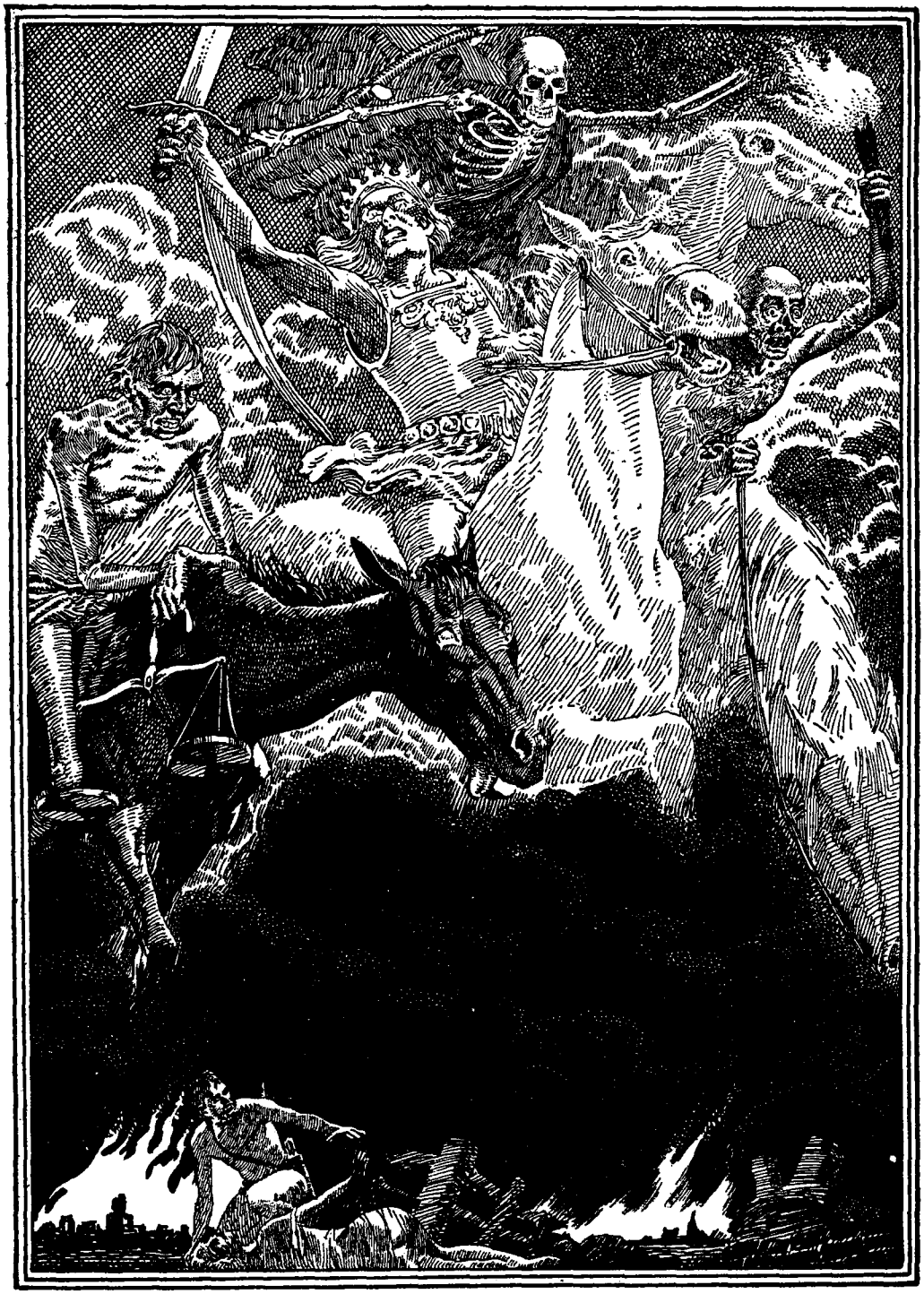

It was years since the world had been free of the scourges of disease, famine, death and war. . . . The Four Horsemen had been riding amok.

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paint, varnish and other necessities, and returned with large drums of tar and some kind of pitch originally intended for road repairs. Once again they dismantled the *Nirvana,* stored pots and pans, mattresses and everything that might be harmed by the rain in the cellar of the Fort, rigged block and tackle to lift the greasy lead ballast blocks onto the jetty, and in the dinghy towed the *Nirvana,* bobbing high in the water, to the nearby mangrove lagoon. At high tide they beached her broadside on, fastened the invaluable block and tackle to masthead and stout tree roots and drew her over one side, half her foul bottom clear of water.

As soon as the weed had dried, they burned it off, hammered away at barnacles, tried to improvise a blowtorch out of a spirit stove, but, failing, fell back on torches of grass, scraped and sweated in the sun, scraped and dripped in the rain. They tested each strake with a penknife, and actually managed to replace one, shaping the new plank with hatchet and drawknife, spending a week bending it with steam in an elaborate steam box of corrugated iron and mud, like a primitive oven. They fitted it, nailed it home, and with improvised tools did quite a good job of chalking.

Pitch, by itself, proved too brittle, and tar remained sticky. But by cooking the two up together in one of the big two-hundred-year-old sugar caldrons, they could experiment with different proportions. Once, the mixture caught fire, to the great danger of the *Nirvana.* Somewhere Ann had read that poison was mixed with bottom paint. Geoff regretted that he hadn't thought of it in time to bring back from St. Thomas every poison he could find. They searched their medical stores and added to the witches' brew minute quantities of corrosive sublimate, which was all they had, hoping that they might at least discourage the teredo.

Then of course the *Nirvana* had to be floated off, turned around and careened anew and the whole process repeated on the other side of the hull. It was at this stage that the hurricane struck.

The ship's aneroid hung, for the time begin, in the Fort. One evening, Ann, rushing to get an early supper, so that they might return for that night to the Hut, noticed that the needle had swung sharply down, lower than they'd ever seen it before. Each year of course had its hurricane season, between June and late October. It might strike anywhere among the Antilles, even as far north as Miami and as far south as the Barbados. No island expected that the course of the wind would hit it squarely more than once in eight years. Nearly eight years now since they had brought the *Nirvana* south, and there had been no appearance of this demon. But if it struck, it could drive ashore the biggest liner caught in harbor, force the seas clear across a low island, cut a swath of utter destruction through the stout stone and concrete buildings of a city.

ANN tapped the aneroid. The needle sank yet farther, and the day, though it was only four in the afternoon, was already darkening.

So far no whisper of wind. Only a tense, headachy stillness. That alone was ominous, when the trade should be sighing softly, steadily through the house.

Strange, she had never known the palms silent before. Five paces took her out to the veranda. Geoff was down there by the *Nirvana;* he must come at once to shelter. There were two things only you can do, the islanders had said: get under the most solid protection you could find, ten feet of stone was not too much. Or race out into the open fields, lie flat on the ground and twist your fingers into deep grass roots. There were no open places near the Fort.

"Geoff! Hi, *Geoff!*"

At the urgent tone in her voice he dropped his tools.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she called, waving her arms in signal.

Not a sound of insect, not a cheep of frog, a slow swell in the sea beyond the bar the only visible movement. The two pelicans which, a half hour back, had been putting on their usual show of clown acrobatics had disappeared. The inner bay lay flat as though unable to move, still as a darkening mirror.

With Geoff on his way, Ann rushed back into the house to prepare the defense. All windows must be closed, shutters bolted firmly home lest the wind catch fingerhold and, once inside the house, explode the roof. Too bad the shutters were so rotten, but it had been impossible to keep both this place and the Hut in good repair. The prison cells below had the stoutest door and ceiling of arched concrete. Stores were there too. Ann filled a bucket with water, checked on other necessities. Geoff could bring down mattresses when he came, candles and matches were there already. But a deck of cards might prove useful if they were prisoners for long.

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Why hadn't Geoff come yet? She forced open the door on the veranda; there was no wind against it, but a pressure of air, like a solid mass. In the rapidly growing dusk she could just see Geoff's white shorts, out on the *Nirvana*. He seemed to have released the rope on the mast, for the boat had partly righted herself, and he was on her tilted deck, clinging with one hand, racking round the small capstan. That meant he had carried an anchor out into the lagoon and was trying to kedge her off.

Strange the way the palms were bending, without the usual spring back between gusts. And the remnants of the Stars and Stripes which, quite illegally, they flew from the Fort flagstaff, stood stiffly out like a flag of painted tin. Ann, letting the door close behind her, remembered can opener, glasses, knives and forks. And she'd have to struggle with those mattresses by herself.

There was no direct entrance to the cells; everything had to be carried down an outside flight of stairs and into the cellar. Despite her care, the wind got under the second mattress and nearly hurled it, and her with it, over the stone parapet into the sea. Her burden shed, it was with increasing difficulty that she struggled back up the stairs. The heavy oily swell on the bay had changed to breakers which, even within the protection of the reef, were thundering upon the rocks, the spray driving like bullets even onto the high veranda.

She heard a chair tear along the porch and splinter into matchwood against the wall. Oh, if Geoff would only come!

At last, dripping from spray or rain, he hurled himself in at the back door, silhouetted for a moment against the green-gray gloom without.

"Grab some clothes and blankets." Ann had to shout above the uproar. "We've got all we need below."

This time it took their combined strength to force open the outer door, which closed like a clap of doom behind them. Geoff reached back and dropped the heavy bar across it. Each had to cling, Geoff pressing his weight against her for anchor, to the wall, until, at the bottom of the stairs there was protection from the Fort itself. Torrents of rain, scarcely noticed beside the terror-inspiring gale, now blotted out the island.

Sea, shore, palms, rain and spray merged in a darkening grayness, as though a hand had smudged an unfinished painting. For a few paces they had to cleave a way right into the eye of the wind which, even behind the protection of the outer wall felt like the smashing blow of a shipped sea. Something in Geoff's arms carried away, clubbed Ann on the shoulder.

On hands and knees they felt their way into the cave-like passage. Inside, now. Their united efforts dragged home the outward-opening heavy iron door.

Here, freed from the physical struggle, Ann's lungs sobbed relief. Groping for matches her wet hand soaked the first so that it failed to strike. A light, then the pale gleam of a candle.

NO LATCH on the inside of the prison door, but a cord passed through one of the bars of the inspection grille and anchored round four heavy cases of milk would help secure it against any pumping effect of the wind; its weight and rusty hinges would do the rest.

Geoff glanced round in admiration. "Good girl, Ann, thinking of all this. Even to the cards!"

Then his forehead creased with worry. "Got the *Nirvana* out, riding to anchor, battened down. But even if the hook grips, her rotten cable must have parted already." He cocked his head to listen to the dull, continual boom which penetrated even through the four-foot thickness of walls. It was more than a boom; even the cement floor and solid walls vibrated to the smashing seas below, to that elemental force above.

"The pan roof of the old post office sailed just over my head as I came up," he said. "Nearly saved me a haircut."

Half the best cocoanut trees on the island would be torn up, and the cabins with wide-open doors and windows would burst into splinters. Ann had seen many such on this island and on others, like a matchbox exploded by a Fourth of July cracker. She was grateful now that Geoff, for some reason, had always insisted they leave Fisherman's Rest shuttered and barred, even if they were to be away only one night. It wasn't as strongly built as the Fort, but it might ride this out.

Next morning they woke to find it bright, and the rain-washed air incredibly clear. Heavy seas still pounded against the reef and leaped high in the cleft of St. Thomas across the bay, the spray glittering like fountains in the sun. But nothing had happened to the Fort. Exactly nothing. Which, after eight years of neglect, spoke well for its builders. But the little settle-

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ment. . . . Ann turned her eyes away.

And the *Nirvana*? Out of sight and deemed lost. But they discovered her wedged tightly among the mangroves, at least fifteen feet above high-water level, and a good hundred yards from open water. The trees were so close about her they appeared to have grown up overnight to hedge her in. Ann left Geoff to investigate the damage and set off anxiously for Fisherman's Rest.

Luck again, amazing luck. Perhaps the hurricane's full force had been broken by Hognest Point to the west, or the island to the south. Fewer trees were down, the hut itself intact. Both of the carefully domesticated milch goats were dead. At this time of the year they were dry; otherwise she would have driven them over to the Fort. She was sorry, for they had become real pets. But the other goats and the hens appeared still puzzled but unharmed.

Geoff's report on the *Nirvana* was first jubilant, then perplexed. As far as he could see, the mast wasn't sprung and not a plank was started. But how in the name of heaven were they to get her out? It looked at first like the work of a year; but a month's toil, clinging to slimy roots, slipping into bottomless black ooze, forever hacking away with the axe, and they had cleared a trail, built something like a launching way under her, and for the last eighty yards cut out an elaborate maze of a channel. Even with her ballast added, she showed no leak once the dry planking had swollen back.

There followed whole weeks of planning, of list making, of provisioning and equipping. Geoff was obstinate in refusing canned goods, as though afraid that Ann's stock, enough, she declared, for a hundred years, might fail before his return. In the end he promised to stop in at St. Thomas and take on a few more cases of this and that.

The hurricane season passed. For one cause and another it was spring before they held that farewell dinner. April, the best time of the year, safe from hurricanes and winter weather. Ann was glad of the delay, for even a three days' storm might prove too much of a strain on Geoff's health, with no one to relieve him at the helm, no one even to serve him hot food.

At the last minute she weakened. The picture of Geoff and the hardships he would have to undergo alone forced her to suggest, then even to demand, that he take her with him. But he refused. The *Nirvana* would be gone six months, perhaps even more. And in that time the garden would be lost, as well as animals, everything that had taken them nearly nine years to build up.

"Lord knows I'd like you to come, Ann. But is it worth it?"

Ann, knowing he was right, agreed and was silent.

Next morning she watched the *Nirvana* swing west out of the bay. Before it had passed out of sight, standing over southward toward St. Thomas, she took herself firmly in hand and turned to pack the donkeys' panniers. Then she postponed departure on one pretext or another.

That evening, watching from the high ground to the south of Cruz Bay, she fancied she saw the sail again repassing St. John's on the beginning of its long beat eastward to the Azores. She prayed, quite literally prayed, that Geoff would put in for just one more night, discovering perhaps something to be missing.

But as she picked her way down the rocky trail, dazzled by the glory of the sunset over the dark silhouette of St. Thomas, she had the grace to be grateful that her prayer remained unanswered. Had he returned she would not have let him go. This foretaste of the loneliness to come was worse than she had imagined. Before, he had been gone only for a night or so, but now he would be gone a year; perhaps, and it was no slight risk, would never return.

Back at the empty Fort she made herself cook a decent meal, gave herself a set plan for the future. But when she sought sleep trouble began. Geoff, coughing himself to death, choked by hemorrhage; Geoff dying more mercifully, but yet as certainly by drowning. . . . A hundred times she switched her thoughts determinedly, putting such dread pictures from her. At last she conjured up the vision that she needed, a pale wraith of the imagination which she grasped and lost and grasped again. Of Geoff, safely returned, dropping an anchor inside the reef; of Geoff, setting ashore her sister-in-law to be. What would the girl be like?

ANN off-loaded the donkeys by the hut, turned them into the fenced-in pasture, carried the canned goods, load by load, up the steep flight and into the airy kitchen, then dived blindly, head foremost into work.

For a week, from dawn to dusk and even by lamplight she gave Fisherman's Rest an intensive spring cleaning, a cleaning

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and scouring and polishing such as no house on the island had ever before received. Conscientiously she made herself halt for meals, but carried them on a tray down to the trees above the jetty that she might not, quite yet, be forced to face an empty chair, or worse, a blank space across the table. Twice a day her only relaxation was a dive from the rickety pier. The brief time before her eyes closed in sleep served merely to plan the next day's work.

The house was shining with her labor. The rains had come; now she must turn to the garden. Here it was more difficult, for this was work she had shared with Geoff. But the rich odors from the damp earth, as her hoe drove in, flicked the soil skillfully to one side, drove in again, up one row and down the next, rose like a perfume of promise. When these small seeds had leafed, had flowered, surely when they had fruited, Geoff would be back with her again, back to count the flowers, to share the fruit. Geoff and the Other One.

Yams and sweet potatoes had become their staples. She must have rows on rows of those, and peanuts which grew on high ridges in the sandier soil uphill. There was something like a peanut, too, whose name they had never learned in the old days. She planted more rows of those, for they were excellent when cooked. While Geoff was still here they had marked the plants from which came the most edible bananas and the best plantains, the bigger, unsweet kind that were so good when fried. After the plant had fruited it died, but there remained from five to twenty smooth green suckers. These must be separated, and by way of experiment she planted many between the vegetable rows. Only by trial and error could she learn what crops would benefit from the shade of their wide umbrella leaves. And there still remained enough suckers to enlarge the original banana patch.

They had corn, too, and sweet peppers, though so far the corn had not done as well as expected. Perhaps by keeping on they might develop a variety that fitted the climate. She wanted enough surplus grain to parch and pound into corn meal. The original maize had come from Yucatan or some one of the Central American countries with not widely different climate, and anyway the natives of this island had raised the stuff.

Maybe there was some trick about the season of planting. Papayas were a godsend; they grew anywhere and anyhow, just from the seed, large of fruit but a little coarse in rich soil, small but particularly delicious from a crack in the concrete beneath the house, where Geoff had started them by scraping the seeds off his plate from the veranda above. Avocados, passion fruit, pomegranate, breadfruit, sweetsop, custard apple; hopefully they had tried to establish all of these from seed and from cuttings. Some would take years, perhaps, to make themselves at home, but she continued to add to the experiments. She'd have tomatoes too, ready for Geoff before he returned; the seeds had come up nicely in the little box on the veranda. And the greatest surprise, if only it came off, would be the lettuce.

The previous year she had discovered just one small, stray head of lettuce in the garden by the Fort. She had all but cut it, then bravely resisted her vision of a real salad and had caged it round to protect it from the birds, revisited it to water it in secret, watched it begin to turn yellow; then, as though it knew that death was near, it began to shoot up a spire of flower. How she hoped the seeds would be fertile —the ridiculous little things fine as poppy seed. They were now in another of those veranda boxes, in soil twice baked to free it of insects and weeds, and the boxes themselves supported on ant-proof tins of kerosene.

So each night at sunset she did the rounds of the wire fencing as Geoff had done, made sure that the *chevaux-de-frise,* the wire on its removable wooden trestle, was fixed across the entrance; as she had promised Geoff she would do. No monkeys, or whatever they had been, must be allowed to wreck her ambitious garden.

Weeks passed; one month, two, dragged slowly by, and still she forced herself to the dulling routine. If she allowed herself to run off to Cruz Bay to watch for a sail, she would be liable to waste the day there, and the habit would be hard to break.

For a change she turned her attention back upon the house, even repaired a rotten plank in the floor. Then back again from housework to the first hoeing, wearing shorts and brief halter and a homemade palm leaf hat, to protect her against the sun and the soft tropical rains that, sluicing down, caught her at her work.

CHAPTER VII

ONE day, catching sight of herself in the mirror of the dining room, as she ate, she stopped to stare, then left the table for a closer inspection. Did

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she really look like that? . . . She had quite forgotten, so seldom and so casually did she use the mirror. With no other woman in sight for nine, ten years, she'd almost forgotten the standard of feminine beauty.

The neat little gold necklace, dug out from an old box of personal belongings in her bedroom, scarcely showed against the deep gold brown of her flesh. But somewhere, she remembered, was some Woolworth jewelry, a small remainder of the trade-goods they had brought from Baltimore, a biscuit-tin full perhaps. While her food dried in the plate she went seeking the ornaments; a half dozen white and gay-colored bracelets of some bone-like composition, three necklaces in painted aluminum like thick white daisy chains, large earrings, the screws very rusty, heavy as white cherries. She decked herself in them, took the mirror from the wall to set it on a chair by the doorway.

Yes, the barbaric figure she saw reflected there was healthier, happier than it had ever been before. Parading herself from every angle she realized that the constant swimming and diving had kept her back flat and straight in spite of the many hours with a hoe. Both she and Geoff had been fortunate in possessing excellent teeth.

Of course her face did show lines, especially about the eyes, her hands were knotted, her feet broadened and more muscular than convention favored. But still, whoever Geoff brought back with him would find her not unattractive.

From then on she knew that the unknown future husband was in her thoughts more than was really wise; she was building him into something quite beyond reasonable expectation. Supposing that all Geoff could find was a quite impossible little beast, someone contemptible or cruel, or . . . though that might not be so bad, a cripple. . . .

Supposing Geoff failed altogether. Or died before he could return?

It was to smother this fear that she built up her future husband into someone who already worked beside her in the garden, who went with her on her rare excursions to exchange the donkeys, someone for whom she all but laid a place at table. He even began to grow, by constant association, into one of those matter-of-fact husbands who is liable to say, "Darling, what a smart new hat you're wearing!" when of course it was only the one she'd made of palm leaves over a year ago.

With her phantom sweetheart growing in distinctness she worked harder to deserve his admiration, sang, in her light, rather sweet voice, such songs as she could remember, and chatted about such things as caught her attention. At least she rationalized it, if Geoff never returned, she could keep beside her this creature of her mind, unchanging, unaging and for as along as she herself continued to live. If in the end she came to believe in the comforting fiction she would be mad. But it would be a madness harmful to no one, and be in itself not uncomforting.

So the garden prospered, as gardens will for the contented gardener. The goats grew more tame, the half-wild chickens laid eggs in cheery abandonment. She took to planning for the future; when Geoff came back they'd build a wooden plow and set the donkeys to work, a tremendous saving of labor. Meantime she'd turned one neat trick of which she was absurdly proud.

By tethering the donkeys and goats where the bush strove to creep through the fence, she not only held it back, but repulsed the lush growth for a yard or two each month. The monkeys ate what the more fastidious goats refused; on the other hand the goats would stand on hind legs and bark the trees as high as they could reach; such trees would die, and when Geoff came back he could hack them down and burn them.

Midsummer came, and with it the season of hurricanes. But there was no *Nirvana*.

She hoped then that Geoff had not already sailed. The aneroid was on the boat, but daily she scanned the sky for the telltale lone and feathery cirrus clouds. She began to worry, so worked the harder.

And then the strange monkeys raided once more. They took only what was ripe and seemed to do no needless damage. With more garden stock than she could possibly eat, she did not begrudge It the fruit if It were hungry. But It worried her.

How, for instance, could It get through Geoff's elaborate barbed-wire defenses? When she discovered that It had not merely moved the *chevaux-de-frise*, but actually dragged it back into place again, she realized that the thing had more than brutish cunning. So when she fastened the barrier in place with a strand of twisted wire, and discovered after another raid that the wire had been untwisted, she began to be afraid.

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One day, examining the tracks in the soft moist soil around a seedling bed, she took comfort as usual from the fact that they resolved into a set of prints. But checking them beside her own, she discovered that now they were slightly larger than her own. Not too good. Whatever It was was growing in size, and presumably also in strength and cunning. Oh, if only Geoff would return!

THAT night Ann woke to the sound of a sharp creak, like a small explosion in the emptiness of the hut. She was accustomed to the stretchings and yawnings of a neglected house, to the odd flapping sounds of a bird or of the moon-flower creeper rustling in the trade wind. But this creak advanced along the boards of the old floor.

Someone was walking.

"Ghosties!" she murmured to herself. Then she came broad awake to a realization of the truth. The Animal!

Quite absurdly her first thought was to telephone the police, and how to warn her roommate . . . the one far off in Chicago and doubtless long since dead. Then remembering that this was St. John's she realized that all she could depend upon was her own intelligence and yet slighter physical strength, and slipped in shivering silence from the bed.

Darkness, except for pale starlight outlining the window. Stooping, to avoid coming into silhouette against the faint rectangle of light, she tiptoed to the door, and remembered that it had no bolt. There were no weapons of any kind in the bedroom, but in the living room were chairs, and she had once seen an animal tamer use a chair to ward off an attacking lion.

It, the Animal, had always chosen moonlight nights to raid the garden, but preferred a darker night for this attack on the house. That showed that It had a reasoning mind, and might be more dangerous than a springing lion.

Her plan no more than a vague intention to escape, Ann paused, straining to hear, one hand on the warm wood of the door, fingers slowly raising the latch, then steadily easing open the door, dreading the creak of rusty hinges. If only her hand would stop trembling, and her knees. It was no use being brave in mind if her body persisted in its treacherous cowardice.

She knew what she must do; she must wait until she could locate the Animal by the sound of its movement. Then slip past, trying not to break into noisy panic-stricken flight, but creep step by step down the stairway, and take refuge in the thick undergrowth of the garden.

The living room was silent. Her nose detected a faint goatlike odor, as of unwashed human, and she had to master an impulse to bolt back into her bedroom and pile bed and furniture against the door. But a crash from the kitchen beyond informed her that the living room was empty. Her way was clear. Then, on the point of flight, another plan flashed through her mind.

The kitchen door had a lock, and a key in the lock. The Animal, attracted by the smell of food, had broken a dish, and was likely to be eating. It took all her will power to force herself across the floor, to reach inside the kitchen for the door-handle amidst the frightening human odor and the sound of munching and hard breathing.

Sheer sobbing relief flooded her as the large old-fashioned key turned gratingly in the lock. She was safe, for the moment. Now she could run and. . . . But the window, the kitchen window!

On the verge of flight Ann had to screw her courage together once more, run quickly out on to the veranda, silently unhook the heavy hurricane shutters, slam them shut, swing the iron bar across. Triumphantly but with shaking knees. Now she had the Beast-human safe. At least until It could batter down door or shutters.

Now she must steady her pounding heart and heaving lungs, and think—think. There was no longer need to hide in the garden. There would be time to reach the Fort. But she could not stay there indefinitely, a prisoner peering out from behind barricaded doors and windows.

Standing on the veranda, her senses taut to note any sight or sound of danger, Ann strove to regain her mental balance, to view with cold daylight reason the cause of her midnight terror. "It" was a human, and by its track a boy of thirteen or fourteen, or a girl slightly older. And It robbed because, no doubt, It was hungry. Nothing so awe-inspiring about that, surely! Yet terrors of the unknown, bogies of the night, kept creeping back into her mind, until she had to force herself to go round to the top veranda steps, sit down and deliberately fight the problem out.

The first decision was plain. She must not run away, for the Animal—no, boy or girl—emboldened by her fear would make further raids. The second decision was, if

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possible, to tame or make friends with the strange human. But nothing reasonable could be planned until she had seen It and knew just what It was. That meant that she must wait until daylight.

She dared herself to return to the dark living room and extract her shorts and halter from the creaking drawer of the bureau. Returning to the starlight she slipped them on at the head of the steps, listening for sounds behind her. Courage and its accompanying common sense flooded warmly back, both from the successful facing of an imaginary danger and from the reassuring touch of clothing. . . .

Then the stars paled in the sky, and it was morning. Resolutely Ann rose to go and examine her prisoner.

Opening the shutters, she noted that the creature had not raised the inside sash nor made any other obvious attempt at escape. Returning, she peered through the keyhole, but could see nothing of him, or her. Used to sleeping in the open the—whatever it was—lacked the stir of waking wild life around to rouse it, and had been lulled by the darkness of the shuttered window. At last she saw a shadow go to the brightening window, and pass a hand across the glass as though puzzled. But at least it was a human hand . . . and the body, she could see now, was furless, dark. . . . A boy, just a boy!

In relief she called, "Hello! Hi, there!"

At the sound the boy whirled round to stare, then shrank as though frightened from her field of vision.

"I'm sorry I had to lock you up." How silly her night's anxieties now seemed. "I'll let you out just as soon as you promise not to steal again."

No answer. But surely he must understand English.

"You must be hungry. I'll have breakfast ready for you soon." But she hesitated, hand on key. Supposing the boy were mad, his brain turned by his loneliness and hardships. A normal child would long ago have come to the hut in daylight to make friends, even though shyly. And no normal child could have fended for himself. What if he were already a dangerous maniac. . . .

But what nonsense! She must not let her morbid imaginings run away with her again. First she must release the boy, then feed him, then make friends with him; not only for her own sake but for his as well. She flung open the door.

Something snarled and leaped toward her.

Ann rushed past him toward her bedroom. The boy, inspired by common panic, leaped for the veranda, plunged down the steps and was gone.

ANN cowered mentally, if not physically, for more than a week, then damned herself for a feeble product of cottonwool civilization. This life on the island was the natural existence of man, the way of untold thousands of generations, before man reached the stage where he could give way to his fears and call on paid protectors, on army, navy and police to defend him.

Defiant alike of the civilization she had left, of her own fears both real and imaginary, she unbolted the carefully secured shutters, left wide the doors, and made a further gesture of contempt by working in the garden all morning without once glancing up at any unexpected sound in the bush behind her.

Lunch at midday, spiced with self-congratulation, was the best she had tasted for a week. Then, confidence growing with achievement, she packed-saddled two of the donkeys and set off for the Fort. The journey was more difficult than she had expected. The donkeys, for once, stepped more willingly than she. Tangled undergrowth might shelter a hundred people lying in wait, and it was little use to assure herself that the wild boy was probably hiding himself on the farthest tip of the island, more scared of her than she of him.

There was one slight gleam of commonsense humor, when she realized she had had no intention of bringing anything back on the donkeys. Those beasts had been brought along only as companions of the road, for, as she phrased it to herself, their social value. But each pace forward seemed to call for more will power; each half mile was more difficult than the one before. This was, she recognized, no longer honest fear, it was more akin to an approaching mental breakdown, a climax of a long series of emotional stresses which started back in Chicago.

With the gaining of her objective, the lookout on the hill overlooking Cruz Bay, came the crisis. A wave of black terror separated her from the peaceful, sunny afternoon. The donkeys, and all conscious thought, vanished from her mind. Heedless of thorns which gashed, which tore at her garments, she crawled for sanctuary into the thickest patch of scrub. For a moment pictures like nightmares whirled kaleidoscopically before her tight-closed

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eyes, then from sheer uncontrollable need she flung herself flat on the warm ground, buried her head in her arms and wept.

Each sob came as a relaxation to overstrained nerves, a step backward to sanity. Hysterical laughter impended, but she knew enough to check that. Weak as a kitten, she crawled from her refuge. There were the two donkeys, placidly cropping; there was the sea, smooth and blue beneath her, and the pelicans diving in the bay, and the gray Fort rising against the line of distant cays. All the sane normal world of nature that continued to exist whether there were any humans alive in it or not.

Her difficulties sank back into proper perspective. She was just a woman, part-decivilized, nothing very important in the scheme of the Universe, and the wandering boy no more than an opportunity thrown across her path. Whoever or whatever he was, he would have to do for a husband, or for a companion in place of Geoff. Geoff, so long overdue, must be written off, like a ship missing and believed lost. Her future now was linked with that of the boy's.

Unwillingly, but conscientiously, she tried to assess him. Fifteen or sixteen? Lank, but strong. Not as far as she could remember, as heavy or as tall as his footprints had suggested. There was nothing to suggest that the boy was vicious. He had robbed only because of hunger; that might imply a conscience or an extreme simplicity that valued nothing but food. And he had done no intentional damage in the kitchen, just eaten the food that was on the dish.

So far and no farther she got in her guesswork before the waning sun warned her to round up the donkeys and return. On arrival she off-saddled the donkeys, to demonstrate to herself that she had full control, then just as deliberately lighted a lamp and bolted such doors and windows as had bars. No point in letting needless strain put too hard a test on her new found balance. On the other hand, not again would she allow plain fright to keep her imprisoned in the hut; she would continue her occasional journeys to the lookout and even to the Fort.

Hope for Geoff's safety had vanished. Not on the logical grounds that he was so long overdue, but by some shock effect of her adventure. Gone, too, was her phantom sweetheart. Was it because that imaginary but comforting presence had failed to come to her aid, or simply because unpleasant reality had banished soothing dreams?

Ann tried to recall him. Tried to project him forward, walking ahead of her in the garden, so that she might follow, secured by his protection. But as though shamed into desertion, no longer would he appear. Her attempts to sing to him were hopeless, dying before the end of the first verse; and cheerful banalities, "I do hope you don't mind banana fritters again," or "The moonflower has climbed another six inches" echoed on the empty air. She could conjur up no imaginary reply.

The daily pattern of her life became a journey to the lookout, and a few essential chores in slatternly house and deteriorating garden.

The boy made no reappearance. What a short-sighted coward she had been to scare him so! Could she attract him back with food?

Should he visit the hut once more her approach would be far different. She would treat him like a half-tamed domestic animal at first, would place attractive food out for him and then stand back while he gathered confidence to sample it. Food and more food, patiently offered whenever he came for it. She would stand always a little nearer to the dish so that he became accustomed to her. She would speak to him, softly of course; and perhaps he would begin to remember a few words of human speech.

If she could tame him soon enough he might be capable of development into an ordinary if backward human. But that assumed that he was mentally normal, lacking only the stimulus of civilized contacts.

Back and forth she went to the lookout, and occasionally to the Fort. Back and forth with her thoughts turning inevitably to this her greatest problem. Her need for offspring to support her in her last days had merged into an elemental need to repeople the earth.

Yes, it was he, the wild boy who had frightened her, upon whom the whole future now depended. What irony that civilization should now depend on the child who had rejected civilization, and been rejected by it!

WHEN a sail actually appeared, far off, she turned to shut it from her view. There was no sail. There could be no sail. In a moment she would turn around again and the sail would have vanished from the sea.

She turned seaward again. And there, still, was the sail!

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It was time to start back for the hut. But instead she took the path down to Cruz Bay.

The boat was making for the bay. Even if it were not the *Nirvana,* at least it must have a skilled and presumably civilized human on board. If it were no ship at all. . . . If the sail simply vanished and the vision were proved to have been a hallucination. . . . That was the most dreadful prospect. People went mad in solitary confinement, didn't they, and began to "see" things?

As though to force even a figment of the imagination into factual existence, she kept her eyes on the boat, stumbling in her hurried descent, stubbing her bare toes but unconscious of the pain. When trees and a dip in the path shut the sail from view, she ran, sobbing incoherent prayer. But, as she topped the next small rise, the sail and boat came again into her sight, into her possession.

It certainly looked like the *Nirvana.* But if so, Geoff had lost the trick of entering. It would take him two tantalizingly slow tacks in the light airs to reach the passage through the outer reef. If she went to the ruined stone wharf she would find herself swimming out to sea to meet him. Instead she turned off to the Fort, trembling with excitement, to begin to make ready a welcome.

FROM the higher ground of the Fort veranda, she was sure it was the *Nirvana,* or the twin of her. And Fate, coincidence, or whatever you like to call it, could not be so cruel as to send so rare a thing as the *Nirvana's* double into this one place of all the world. Racing down to the store room in the cells, climbing back with armfuls of provisions and pans, she prayed that she would not be disappointed. Back to the veranda she raced before she even unloaded her arms in the kitchen. Back again to the veranda between lighting the stove and putting on the kettle. This time she was sure the boat could be no other than the *Nirvana.*

It was growing almost too dark to see, and the lamplight streaming out from the kitchen made it difficult to discern more than the outlines of the sails, an occasional splash of white water at the bow. But Geoff would know that the light meant reassurance, welcome. And the fort was one of the two landmarks which he always used to guide him over the bar.

But—had Geoff forgotten? That wasn't the passage. There were niggerheads of sharp jagged coral dead ahead of him.

Something almost ready to serve was burning in the kitchen, but she could not tear herself from the veranda rail.

Ah, he had swung hard aport. Now he'd come around again. Geoff must be ill or hurt; never had he sailed like that.

Evidently by sheer luck the *Nirvana* won to still water. She turned, tore down the steps, raced for the beach. Geoff used to drop anchor, come ashore in the dinghy. But, of course, the dinghy would be lashed on deck.

The *Nirvana,* her mainsail dropped and jib gathered in, nosed softly into the dock. Now as she ran, she could see for the first time a human figure—Geoff's, for there was only one—scramble awkwardly ashore, make fast to the one remaining bollard. Almost before he could raise his head she was in his arms.

"Oh, Geoff, you're back, you're back! Nothing else really matters."

Geoff hugged her a moment. But this feeble scarecrow with shaking frame was nothing she could remember as her brother.

"I've failed. There was no one." Haggardly his eyes stared. "Food, for God's sake give me food. I think I can walk as far as the Fort."

Hope so slowly torturingly killed, unexpectedly resurrected, had, Ann saw, to die yet again. Geoff's days were all but ended, and it was additional irony that with his physical incapacity was linked a wildly unpractical optimism. He would set sail again almost at once, for the Old World, this time select the most promising family of colonists that he could find and bring them back. He'd interest a group of yachtsmen in coming across to cruise among the islands; they'd naturally want to stay at the hut, or the Fort, for a week or two after a long voyage, and Ann could look them over and take her pick for a husband.

Ann began by treating these ravings as a joke. But she soon realized that Geoff was utterly serious. He'd go on even to elaborate schemes for becoming the suzerain of an island empire, each island a separate plantation settled by a different patron; and he seemed to have worked out all details, even to the second and third generation. He was rather in favor of Germans, if he could persuade them to colonize; they would be hard workers. So would the Swiss, but Swiss didn't colonize easily.

Thus on and on, interrupted by coughings, which racked his emaciated body,

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even the very first evening of his return, till Ann found it necessary to humor him, to plan the repairs and victualling of the *Nirvana;* and got him to bed only by a promise to begin the very next morning.

Then Ann slipped out, to pace the moonlit beach until the coughing grew less frequent, until she could force herself to take comfort from the fact that Geoff had returned, at least for a while. Years back she had known that this must be, and now that the time had come she must face it.

The *Nirvana* was in dreadful state. Each attempt to clean, to scrape, to repair, uncovered further decay and corrosion. Ann learned not to probe too deeply, to lay on a slap of paint, a serving of twine, a patch of canvas or a plug of wood and to hope for the best.

"I ought to have tried to get new sails, or at least new canvas, at Baltimore," Geoff admitted. "But—well, I was frightened." And bit by bit he unburdened himself of the account of his wanderings.

As planned, he had gone straight back to his old moorings. An empty harbor from which every boat seemed to have fled when the plague had struck; a repetition of St. Thomas on an enormous scale, but with the details softened by overgrowth and time. The city seemed asleep, many streets stood unharmed, glass intact in windows, even an awning or two flapping in the soft wind. All as quiet as on a peaceful Sunday morning, only that the awnings were torn and stained, cars stood on their flat tires, bleaching and rusting in the streets. And, rounding a corner, one came unexpectedly on some scene of complete devastation, an entire block, an entire section burned to the ground, or blasted out as though to stop the progress of the city fire, and with sumac and the tall purple fireweed sprouting from the sunken cellars. There was no sign of life, not so much as a wild dog, or a cat, or a mouse, and Geoff believed that an epidemic, or epidemics, had struck the beasts; it was the only way he could account for their absence. He found scarcely even a track across the rank grassland that had once been the public park.

ANN, listening, put forth a different theory. That in closely settled country most life, from rats to cattle, had come to depend on humans, so that with the extinction of the human race whole groups of animals would have starved, and others would have so dwindled in numbers, so changed in their mode of life as to pass unnoticed.

From the ghost city Geoff had struck inland, convinced that he would find somewhere a farmer, perhaps an entire village that had had the sense to stand off contagion-carrying refugees at the point of a gun. There must be survivors somewhere, he told Ann, Indians in the green depths of the Okefenokee swamp in Northern Florida, trappers hidden in the clean heights of the Rockies, perhaps astronomers in their observatories; a hermit here, or there a fugitive hiding in a cave. But he had gone as far as his food and strength would carry him, and had found no one. No one at all. Not till he turned back through the desolate land did he begin to hear the silence.

Silence deep and unbroken, never-ending, terrible, which now he began to believe stretched across a mighty continent, from ocean to ocean. Sometimes he tried to sing, to whistle, to shout to break it; but unanswered, his voice died empty in the unpeopled silence. In the footsteps of the silence came the horrors, and he rushed blindly along the broken roads, eastward, in headlong flight.

On his way back to Baltimore he'd broken into crumbling hot-dog stands, ruined filling stations, finding plenty of canned meat, fruit and vegetables. Now, returning by a different route, he struck twenty or thirty miles of what must have been a new-cut highway, between one village and the next, without a chance to find supplies.

Once he suffered from what he took to be ptomaine poisoning, once went hungry for two days. What was worse, he overshot Baltimore, came to open water and had to work his way North again along the shores of Chesapeake Bay. Raiding a general store in Baltimore for dried foods, canned goods, and kerosene for the *Nirvana's* cooker he had brought away also an armful of women's dresses. Some might fit, some obviously wouldn't.

That had been a generous thought, on Geoff's part, since by that time he was obviously so ill, so filled with horror that he had provisioned the boat mainly with canned pineapple and nearly starved to death on the way south again. It was obvious to Ann that the journey and its hardships had brought on a recurrence of Geoff's illness.

What he had done, the march inland, the provisioning in Baltimore had been the superhuman effort of a man who knew

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that his end was near. Since he had, in his dazed desperation, brought her some dresses, Ann showed her appreciation by making something in the way of an evening toilette, even to rancid lipstick, but lacking stockings, shoes, underwear of course, and her hair in open rebellion.

Even the damp-spotted and unflattering mirror told her that golden-skinned health, a youthfully trim body and her exhilaration at Geoff's return made her worth the attention of masculine eyes, had there been a man.

Geoff, at least, approved during dinner. "You're looking swell, Ann. This climate and hard work seem to agree with you."

Ann laughed and, rising to clear away some plates, took a few dance steps before the mirror. "Quite the best-dressed woman on the island," she said.

Then Geoff started to cough and had to go out and lean over the veranda rail.

Ann sighed, and as soon as the meal was over she slipped out of the garment. Her skin had apparently learned to breathe at every pore in these years of semi-nakedness, and now felt choked and smothered under even the thinnest covering. Worse than that, she knew that the clothes, and the return of Geoff, were taking her farther from the wild boy, weakening her resolution. The sooner she could launch Geoff on his last fruitless voyage, the better. How cruel it sounded! But she would have to be a hundred times as stern and ruthless with herself.

Once, during the following week, she caught Geoff off guard, and knew that he also knew that his time had almost come.

Now the *Nirvana* was as seaworthy as they could make her at such short notice. Provisioning was simple. They stowed every gallon of fresh water for which they could find containers, and as much canned goods as they could find room for since on a one-man cruise he would get little chance to cook.

At this parting they had no farewell dinner, since neither could have borne the strain. Instead Ann dressed in her new best one morning, helped Geoff carry down his last few personal belongings, and, with a firm fixed smile, waited on the stone jetty. She was doing her best to make the farewell casually stoic, stoically casual.

The dinghy had to be hauled aboard and lashed in place. A halyard parted and had to be repaired, poor auspice for the success of a long voyage. Ann, watching the sky, hoped there would be no further delay, for her fortitude would not bear it. Geoff hadn't sufficient blankets. . . . At the last moment she discovered it, and hurried back to the Fort to bring out two heavy woolen covers that had lasted because they had been too thick for use on the island.

She knew, as she ran back to the beach, that her resolution was melting away. Just the echo of her footsteps in the empty Fort brought back such a forlorn remembrance of her weeks alone on the island, such a nauseating scent of the wild boy to whom, if she stayed, she must dedicate her future. Hurry as she might with her return load, she knew this last delay had beaten her.

There stood Geoff, gaunt and staring, but still trying to smile, arms extended for the bundle. She threw it to him, cast off the mooring from the rotting bollard, and leaped lightly on to the deck beside him.

For his last few weeks of life he would need warmth, food, care and affection. And only she could give it.

"Oh, Geoff, I can't let you go alone. But don't stop for more stores; perhaps we can pick them up at St. Thomas. I'm coming with you, Geoff. I'm coming too!"

BOOK FOUR: The Silent Land

CHAPTER VIII

THE shadow moved skillfully silent, through thick undergrowth of bramble and scrub ash, paused on the edge of a small stream, thrust out a bearded head with quick daring eyes, and waited, listening. A puzzling human track lay clear and deep on that muddy shoal. It was too narrow in proportion to its length to be a woman's. A small man, guessed the hunter, and probably a middle-aged adult, as the toes were still malformed by long-forgotten boots.

Bare, except for a fox-skin around the waist for protection rather than decency, the stalker drew back, making a short circuit to avoid leaving cover. Not for him the careless folly of his quarry, who had bent back boughs and must have moved as noisily as a herd of domestic cattle. Cattle, for that reason, had been killed off long ago. Not for two seasons had he seen one alive. How had this clumsy little human runt managed to survive so long?

At dusk the hunter was still following the trail and, by the signs, closer upon his prey. While there was still sufficient light to move soundlessly, he circled to a

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point overlooking his own tracks, a precaution lest the hunter himself be hunted. The beginning of a cold drizzle suggested a night of rain; this was not forest land, which might give some protection, but, by the growth had ridges in the soil, once-cultivated farmland which had reverted to bush.

The hunter stopped to think, not in the passive pose he once would have assumed, but with the now habitual restlessness, head turning to glance behind him, ears forever listening, even his nose inhumanly alert. Dusk, when a man was preparing to lie up for the night, was the most dangerous time, more dangerous even than dawn. Any movement, however cautious, meant a faint betraying sound, so it was important, where possible, to use the mind to save the feet. The hunter set himself to recall and visualize his surroundings, each slope of the ground, the direction of the small stream, even the lie of the furrows.

From this picture he deduced where, for reasons of water supply and access to the fields, the homestead would have been. With added caution he covered the next hundred paces, stopping repeatedly to listen; for man, even after years away from tobacco, still had only a feebly degenerate sense of smell to warn of lurking danger. A tall bed of nettles scarcely troubled his hardened hide and were welcome as a sign that his guess had been right.

He reached the remains of a stone wall, not four feet high, fallen, by good luck, on the weather side. He unstrung his bow, coiled the cord and thrust it into his fox-skin pouch. The bow shaft he laid carefully beside the wall. He was hungry, painfully hungry, but that was usual nowadays, between brief bouts of gorging. When hungry it is wise to lie on the stomach, which otherwise grows painfully distended and rumbles, so that an enemy in this ever-listening world might hear and kill in one's sleep.

Carefully he stretched out beside the bow, forehead resting on the left forearm, to leave the ears uncovered; in his outstretched right hand the bare, oft-sharpened bayonet, all that remained now of an earlier life.

Dawns were treacherous and called for special care; one's overnight tracks led to the lie-up, and an enemy might wait for the first unguarded sound or movement of a man rash enough to sleep till there was light. On the other hand, the dusk of pre-dawn, like the dusk of evening, made it impossible not to tread on an occasional crackling twig, and a motionless, soundless enemy held one at a disadvantage. But existence was now a sequence of such dangerous alternatives between which one had to choose. The frequency or scarcity of human tracks, the available cover, the weather, and above all one's need of food were the decisive factors.

By dawn the hunter, guessing the prey's probable direction, had cast in a semi-circle and come again upon the tracks. And again he had cause to marvel that the man, whoever he was, had survived so long. He was surely traveling directly from one obvious landmark, a bare, round-topped hill, to another, a rusty iron trellis-work, which once perhaps had been a wireless mast. Once, in the dawn of history, Stone Age man had beaten regular tracks that way, from landmark to landmark. But that had been in a day when mankind was striving upward, toward civilization. Now, in this broken world broken men lurked beside such obvious and tempting paths, waited in ambush like spiders at their web. Or had done so until all sensible men had learned to avoid them.

He heard the thud of several blows, a scream, shakingly loud in the silence of the early morning. In midstride the hunter swung from the track, swiftly, but ever cautious, and halted after a short distance, listening, first back, then for a sound which would allow him to get a cross-bearing on the killing. Arrow ready notched on bowstring, a spare arrow grasped in the knuckle of his left hand, he thrust his way forward.

On the grassy verge of a drinking pool, two men, one sawing with a knife, bent over a third. The hunter's arrow missed, he charged forward with the knife. Just too late. The attackers crashed noisily into the undergrowth.

Only a moment could he spare to examine the body. He saw a wizened little thing covered with dreadful sores, bald-headed, its throat cut, the head almost completely severed. A heavy bag, the weight of which accounted for the shortness of the stride, lay beside the repulsive naked corpse.

AS THE hunter left, he snatched up a fallen knife, and with the bag leaped back again into the shelter of the bushes. But he had noted one more surprising feature. The wretched little body actually wore the remains of what had been a truss, to hold in rupture or hernia.

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And, a last surprise. The bag was loaded with tightly bound bundles of paper, package after package neatly tied with red tape. French and English currency notes, all of high denominations.

The hunter's bearded face wrinkled in what might have been a laugh. Even two years ago, when man still dared to build an occasional fire, these could have served as kindling. Now they were not even of that much value; smoke was too dangerous.

But what an idiot he had been blindly to rush in, urged forward by some outdated motive, possibly even a fantastic desire to rescue. Now two enemies, working in combination, knew where he was, though their position was unknown to him. He had also to recover his arrow if he could. And the little old man, the strangers' victim, had been quite unfit to eat.

Caution and silence do not go with speed. Sometimes at a slow walk, parting the bushes with one hand, releasing them so that they made no sound, testing each footfall, sometimes moving forward at a crawl, only a step at a time, he worked directly away from the pool of the killing, then swung in a wide circle. Not one mile in ten did one travel in a straight line these days; always one was forced to swing in wide detours, to surprise the foe, or to make sure that no one was on one's own trail. Not till the sun was overhead did he locate the first of the two men.

Half a sole of one bare foot showed among a jumble of rock. The other man further on, and listening, was not located till the sun was half toward setting. He also was motionless and listening.

These two men were cowards and quite despicable, according to the accepted views of knightly chivalry or the later amateur sportsmanship. Had not two men killed someone weaker than themselves and then fled from a single man who opposed them? Mere human jackals, according to old ideas. But the hunter approved of them. After all, they were only realists, getting what they needed with a minimum of risk. Survival was sufficiently difficult without incurring needless danger.

Now, having located his enemies, he was safe to return, cautiously, to the scene of the killing. No beasts had ever lived in the constant strain to which surviving humans were subjected in this day. There was only one lion to many hundred zebra that he preyed upon, and zebra did not prey on fellow zebra. And even a fox pursued by the whole pack and many mounted riders had months of safety for each day of danger. But now man was both hunter and hunted; he needed his fellow men for food; his fellow men, for the same reason, needed him. Cunning to kill and not be killed and the ability to stand hunger and exposure were stretched to the limit from year's end to year's end.

He retrieved his arrow, took cover, waited again to make reasonably sure that neither of his day's enemies was stalking him. If only he had killed one, or perhaps both, the pains in his stomach would now be appeased. But the sight of that first shrunken body with its many sores had revolted him.

Well, there was rising ground toward the north, and, by the vegetation, the soil was well drained and more sandy, which meant in turn good prospect of finding a rabbit warren. Rabbits were simple, easy to snare, and to a skilled hunter, who knew enough to work up wind, easily slain with an arrow as they came out for their evening feed. The thought reminded the hunter how, for a time, rabbits had grown scarce; men had used a salt-lick. A man would lie up for days, if need be, until the rabbits played and grazed around him waiting for some other man to come rabbiting. After that for a time everyone had avoided such places; manhunters had given up waiting there for their human prey, and the rabbits had increased again. So Nature worked in circles.

Strange to think that one must be like a society woman of the old days, always just a step ahead of the coming fashion.

Musing a little, but forever listening and darting a glance this way and that, he came to a small hillock with close-cropped turf, and circled it with the same elaborate care. He noted the wind, ran hastily on all fours across the patch of open, and dropped to his face within ten yards of some fresh burrows.

A little careful pruning with his knife, and he had perfect cover in a tangle of brambles under a sapling oak. And here he must wait, arrow on bow, soundless, unmoving.

These were the times he dreaded, these times when memories surged back and the mind lay blank to receive them. Speculations rushed in; who was the little man with his head half severed and the load of banknotes; what had he been, back in those days? Had he worn pin-striped trousers, a tail coat and butterfly collar and asked, "How will you have it, Madame,

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in big notes or in small?" Had he, up to the minute of his death, still believed that civilization would return, that nations and governments would be reestablished?

No one knew any longer even what country he was in. Modern war had thrown down all barriers, and intermingled all races in one inextricable tangle.

And who had they been, the murderers of the man? Perhaps one had been an employee on a railway, whose twisted and rusting lines one sometimes stumbled on. And the other man might just as well have been a Persian poet or a Liverpool dock rat. Ninety per cent of Europe's population must be dead, but the remaining ten per cent was still more than the land could support by hunting. A man must be a realist to survive, each day more of a realist, more cunning, more merciless.

SOMETIMES he wondered what had happened to Sergeant . . . what was his name . . . Conley, and the others who'd chosen to stay behind. Only five men had marched out that spring. The mistress of the chateau, by then his wife, had wanted to come with him, and it had been hard for him to refuse. For the men's sake he had to march as soon as possible. And how could she face the hardships which he knew must lie ahead? The more he loved her the more clearly could he see, as the spring drew near, that he must leave her.

And then came the day when Marie, frightened to incoherence, had called him from the parade ground. The girl was ill.

Clumsy in the straw-padded armor of spear-exercise, he had leant over, kissed her, did his best to reassure.

She said, "I could not ask you to stay, because the men needed you too. But I could not let you go . . . alone. But now I have lost everything—it does not matter." A silence while she smiled and he could not speak. . . .

It was only a matter of hours before she died—died for lack of everything, including the final necessary blood transfusion, that medical science a few years back could have given.

When the time came to go all but five half-hearted volunteers preferred to stay with their women.

The men who were staying behind formed up under Sergeant Conley; the men marching out formed up in opposite ranks, just like the changing of the guard. The new guard, under Sergeant Conley, still armed with their useless rifles, the old guard, about to march out, equipped with lances from the chateau walls, newly shafted, of course, even equipped with woolen tassels, whose purpose was to prevent blood running down the shaft and making the grip slippery in battle.

But there had been no battle. Only starvation—and marching, marching, endless marching; through bogs and woods and lands softened knee-deep with the spring thaws. The men would have deserted, but there was nowhere else to go. They cursed him, and in cursing wept, but still obeyed his orders and marched on. Food and roofs became ever more difficult to find, for disappointed bands of brigands had burned their lodgings behind them. They sighted an occasional city, always a ruin, always burned out. It was hard to tell the age of the ruins, since it took so long for trees and even grass to reestablish themselves in the sterile city soil.

Women, from time to time, attached themselves to the little band, and strange men speaking no recognizable tongue, but in search of a leader, any leader. Men melted away; others joined and died or were killed or deserted. The leader's winter practice with bow and arrow made him able to kill an occasional pig or other domestic animal, now gone wild. They encountered other roving bands, but had no thought of battle, for at this stage there was no longer friend or foe—only the beginning of a never-ending hunt for food.

The last of his original soldiers was drowned in a mountain stream in what was perhaps Austria. His band at that time numbered twenty-odd. His strength and growing animal cunning maintained his leadership. The band still traveled by remains of roads, with food scouts out ahead and to the flank. Once it was necessary for him to kill with his own hands, execute, if you prefer the word, a man who'd broken the rule that all game must be shared in common. But food was too scarce, as he now knew, for men to remain in organized groups, though for some time yet they joined him, deserted or died.

Following the river south he came at last to wide water, perhaps the Danube flowing into the Caspian or the Black Sea, he'd forgotten which, though the most elementary guidebook or atlas could have told him in the old days, and the ignorance gave him a queer additional loneliness. The world had gone nameless. Just as later it would go wordless, soundless.

Then no more gangs formed under his

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leadership. Life grew simple, barefooted, skin-robed, fireless. Cannibalism was now the accepted mode of life. It was cannibalism which probably prevented the re-forming of the gangs.

The last gang that he saw, like the last gang that he led was, curiously, composed of women. They'd hunted him for three days. Doubtless they were hungry too and his large footprints had looked attractive.

THEN came the day of small furtive men and women who dug here a root and there a rat, here lived on carrion, and there came across a patch of what had once been cultivated corn and tried to wait about until it ripened and the heads could be torn off and pounded between rocks. This was an experiment by Nature to find a survival type other than the prevailing hunter-cannibal. But the experiment had failed, and the smaller, subnormal, scavenging type had disappeared except on the seashore.

For the hunting type had discovered what rich human hunting was to be had around ripening patches of corn or other edible vegetation. The poor teeth and eyesight and digestions of civilization, plus lack of the most elementary training and even self-discipline, made it surprising that so many humans had adapted themselves and survived. But of course the earlier gang system had softened the transitional stage.

From the first cannibalism was inevitable. The efficient social systems of the old world had made it possible for the farmer to feed many times his number of traders, manufacturers, carriers, distributors, people in the luxury trade and idle gentlefolk. Then, as farming became unsafe, there was a brief moment, a few months, at the most, of occasional surfeit, when livestock could be slaughtered, stores and storehouses filled. But soon mankind was forced to drop back past the agricultural stage, past even the pastoral stage, to the dim, prehistoric age of hunters.

Since wild animals were scarce in Europe, and the human animal unfitted in limb, lung, stomach and teeth, particularly in teeth, for hunting, he had fallen back upon the only source of food supply which existed in sufficient quantities: an animal, half deaf, by comparison with other animals, half blind, almost lacking in the sense of smell, slow of movement, nearly defenseless; he could only prey upon his fellow men.

Of course anthropophagy had existed here and there since the first days of famine, but judging by the remains of the dismembered corpses the hunter had found, he himself was slower than his fellows to make this great discovery, that his fellow man was the only abundant and logical food supply. And this new phase of mankind eating mankind explained a development which had puzzled him at the time; the revival of human enmity. Several times he had come near to being ambushed, though he knew none who hated him, and racial warlike animosity had died out with the war. At last he realized that the would-be murderers had viewed him without hate, quite impersonally, as a well-conditioned piece of meat. Once convinced, he set his tired body and yet more weary mind to work out the tactics and strategy of this new existence.

Ceaseless vigilance by day, careful concealment by night; possibly he was the first to develop the technique of the "death at dawn." One followed the would-be victim of the day until it was dark, guessed where it would lie up, crawled under the cover of darkness close to the spot, and waited there, unmoving, unsleeping, for the first glimmerings of light and the first incautious movements of a man just waking.

But others must have adopted the same methods, for victims soon ceased to sleep until sunrise. So he reversed the process, let himself be the hunted, settled down for his sleep where his attacker might see him, then before dawn crept a little to one side and ambushed the pursuer.

Any man who saw you, or even heard your footsteps must be ambushed, stalked or killed, whether needed for food or not. Otherwise, so long as his strength held out, he would be upon your trail.

This phase seemed to wipe out, for good and all, the chance of gangs developing again. No longer did you come across the warm ashes of a fire left by someone who had cherished a burning-glass or flint and steel. The firemakers either abandoned the dangerous practice of firemaking or, betrayed by smoke and light, had been killed off.

If mankind could not longer associate even in twos or threes, dared not kindle fire, plant corn or graze herds, how could civilization be rebuilt? How could men even speak to each other again, how could language survive?

One direction of travel was as good as another, in these days, as good and as pointless. In one place, as in another,

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might lurk the man who would kill you; might step incautiously the man whose death would prolong your life. The world was filled with anger, but void, utterly void of friendship, human fellowship. Life at that time was a fear and a loneliness. And the greater of the two was loneliness.

SLINKING silently through scrub and tangled savannah land, watching each significant movement of bird and leaf for signs of prey or enemy, moving yet more cautiously through the once carefully conserved forest land, crossing in a quick burst and only after careful preliminary reconnoitering those open grassy ribbons which had once been roads, swimming rivers, but only on moonless nights, the hunter zigzagged down through Europe.

He lived, when for every one who lived twenty must die each year, not counting those who perished of disease or starvation. Alone, always alone, he developed his idiosyncrasies. He carried never less than two bowstrings; feathers too, to fletch new arrows; nails from the ashes of burned-out villages to hammer into arrowheads; sinews for lashing. All these, small and light, went into a leather sporran. But as a shipwrecked sailor was once said ever to hoard ship biscuits, so the hunter hoarded knives.

One hung on either side of his primitive belt. In addition, wherever he had gone, he had made caches of his victims' knives, some rusting away and already forgotten. He saw the kink developing in himself, but was able to rationalize it. Money was useless, gold was useless, everything from insurance policies to diamonds and Old Masters was utterly without value.

Never before in history had this been true; even in pre-history gold, silved, jade or amber had been worth the hoarding. But now mankind was down to bedrock; iron was the only thing of value and then only if it were already in a useful shape. Even if the hunter-hunted had the skill, he had no safe place or time to make charcoal, bellows, build a rudimentary forge and so turn into something practical the rusting railway lines, the fire-twisted girders of bridges and great buildings.

But knives were still available; each man he killed carried either knife or spear, and the hunter collected them all. Among them were a carving knife with an agate handle, a foot and a half of broken sword blade with a neatly added wooden haft, a very serviceable billhook, an elaborately inlaid steel blade with a jeweled handle from one of the Southern Balkan countries, part of a scythe blade and a goodly number of bayonets like his own.

Also, every month or so he developed some new ruse, and he had the self-denial, even when hungry, to follow and observe his prey as long as he dared before killing. Human habits kept shifting, altering, swinging, sometimes, as he had noticed before, full circle. Were all men following the river valleys again? Or keeping to the high watersheds? Did men drink only at night, or was it at night that men now watched for others at the water-holes? Did men now travel fast to outdistance pursuers; or slowly, relying on greater silence and caution?

It paid also to study the seasonal migration of man drifting south for the cold weather, drifting north as summer flowed back. Probably a few of the smaller, timorous folk who dug roots and lived on carrion managed to exist on the northern fringe of this seasonal wave, but the killers, who were better meat, preferred to keep to the southern edge, where the congestion, particularly on the old Riviera during winter, made it easier to slay, though easier also to be slain.

It was before the beginning of one such winter that the hunter found himself with inhospitable lands behind him and a narrow stretch of salt water in front. Across the farther side, as also on the side on which he stood, was the remains of a town. Incredibly, from the farther town went up a thin, pale spiral of smoke as from a single small campfire.

The current was swift and he spent a day studying the effect of the tide upon it. That night he made his crossing, bowstrings knotted in the long hair of his head. He saw no glimmer of a fire as he prowled the deserted streets, feeling his way by touch of hand and foot. Dawn showed the ruins of mosques, and against the glow of the lightening sky, palm trees still loaded with clusters of late-ripening dates. Arabs he recalled had lived on dates. He wandered into courtyard after courtyard, but the pavements, broken and tilted with weeds and neglect, were bare of fruit, even though it hung temptingly overhead, black and yellow, rotten ripe.

Obviously the fruit must fall; hence somebody picked it up.

Cautious only in keeping his back to the wall, incautiously he threw back his head to weigh the risk of climbing; then, startled by a sound he swung hand to quiver, arrow to bow.

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Almost too late. A man, spear raised, and at arm's length, faced him.

If the hunter shot, the man would stab. If the man stabbed, the hunter would shoot. A pulse-beat, two pulse-beats, three, four, five, ten. The hunter could feel time ticking away. Who would strike first, and himself be killed? Or who would lower his weapon and risk the other's doubtful gratitude?

THE man was tall as the hunter, but slighter, wearing what surely was unique at this time, a loincloth. And hair and beard had been trimmed in some fashion, probably with a knife. A savage dandy. But what concerned the hunter was the man's eyes, and whether the muscles of his shoulder would give a twitch of warning. Could a man hold a light spear poised in the air longer than another could keep a bowstring drawn?

Minutes or hours might be passing. This couldn't go on; this was stalemate.

"Stalemate," said the spearman.

"You said . . . ?" asked the hunter.

"Stalemate," said the spearman clearly. "And you said?"

"I said 'you said'."

Something like a smile parted the well-kept beard and he lowered his spear. "We can't go on saying 'I said' and 'You said.' All it conveys to me is that you are English. And that you've lost your mind!"

The hunter considered, letting his bow drop from position. "Is it safe to talk aloud like this?"

"I think so. I keep the city pretty clear. You saw my campfire smoke yesterday, I suppose?"

The hunter nodded.

"I use that like cheese in a mousetrap," explained the other. "Though of course I have to do my own killing. I must have cleared the country for a good five miles around; though of course I take the precaution of rebaiting my trap from time to time.

"I'm a vegetarian, that's why I have to do it," he explained inconsequentially. "I'm also a solipsist, which makes such action pleasingly irrational to the vulgar mind."

The hunter was glancing anxiously about him; to stand thus in the open and unguarded, to raise one's voice in human speech!

"Solipsism," explained the stranger tranquilly, "is often misconstrued. It is in no wise antipathetic to thought, nor is it the negation of action. Merely it asserts that one oneself exists and that all else is subjective, a figment, hallucination if you prefer. And now that we've settled important matters, let me lead you to a date."

Without any thought of treachery the stranger walked ahead, strolled, using his spear as if it were the high-tasseled cane of a Regency beau. The hunter followed, alert, straining to listen above the sound of the other's careless footfalls. This striding through the ruined city in full daylight was rashness to the degree of idiocy. But he must take the risk, must appear unconcerned. A sign of fear would lead even the most timorous to attack. But he should of course say something in return.

"You were up at Oxford, weren't you?" he guessed.

"Christ Church, of course. Where else could one go, with credit to oneself?"

"I'm Cambridge," said the hunter. "Or was."

"How interesting," came back the bored drawl. "I've heard the name. There's a technical school or correspondence college there, isn't there? We turn down to the left."

A neat hideout, the bottom story of what had been a tall minaret, whence the muezzin had once called the Faithful to prayer. But now one had to squirm under piles of stone and plaster to reach the hidden door. A store of dates spread on the clean floor; a broom extemporized from palm fronds, standing in a corner, and a trickle of light from some crevice overhead. The hunter was invited to help himself. While he did so he asked, with assumed carelessness, if the place were safe.

"My system makes it nearly so." The Oxonian lolled with careless grace. A conscientious vegetarian, he explained, was hard put to it these days, and, like the ignoble, carnivorous humans, was forced to be somewhat ruthless. The smoke system played upon the hopes and curiosities of any humans within sight of it, people who otherwise might come unheralded into the city and be a source of danger. But the smoke drew him in, unfailingly, to a definite spot and on a definite day. All then that was needed was to watch the small birds in the date palms, take warning by their alarm and kill as expeditiously as possible. The vultures did the rest.

The vultures were learning to co-operate too. They were accustomed to their benefactor, but when a stranger approached, they had learned that it meant meat, and now they always circled above his head, indicating his course for miles.

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One day a week, perhaps, to clear the human vermin off the grounds; the remaining six days to gather dates, to spread them out to dry for the coming winter, to study the remains of architecture and arrange one's thoughts.

The hunter offered his frank and astonished admiration. Nowhere in his travels had he encountered so ingenious a scheme of existence.

His host waved a languid hand. "It was necessary that one should have leisure for thought. One could not bear a life of haste and scramble."

The hunter choked, then heard himself, surprisingly, laugh outright. Haste and scramble? What were they compared with hunger, cold, thirst, ever-present danger, silence and loneliness? Apologetically he explained the cause of his amusement.

"My good fellow," said the host, "but why suffer these things? Be my guest for two days, and then inherit my little kingdom. The winter tourist season will soon begin, and, frankly, I have abhorred the thought of the additional killing it always entails. To avoid this I decided, only yesterday, to go south. But to you, whose stomach will need training to a purely vegetarian diet, the tourists will be a welcome addition to the menu. Stay, my good fellow, stay."

The sweetness of the dates was utter bliss to one for long years starved of sugar. The hunter finished all that were spread before him and collected the stones in a neat pile to throw out.

"The Touaregs of North Africa," suggested his host, "grind the stones to flour. If you consider staying the winter, consider also making some sort of a grindstone, or pestle or mortar."

But the whole proposition needed careful consideration. Not here, in the presence of his fantastic host, could the hunter weigh with cool judgment. Also, the training of years was against sitting, unarmed, within easy knife thrust of another human. And the talk, incautiously loud, kept him in a state of strained anxiety.

AN elaborately careful tour of the town, his mind distracted by the betraying vultures who circled like a constant air reconnaissance, gave him little relief. There seemed to be no trap behind the generous offer. If a vegetarian solipsist could guard the place thus well, surely he, with his greater experience of mankind, would be safe. And six months of comparative security, freedom to think and plan, would be beyond price.

For years he'd had no plan for the future, had been moved like a pawn across a chessboard, searching food, fleeing danger, urged forward by the hand of hunger, thrust back by that of peril. It was time he decided where he was going; or where the world was tending, which was the same thing.

Existence, as he lived it at present, depended entirely upon his physical powers; he was a heavyweight, and heavyweights used to slow down early on the football field or in the ring. He was twenty-five—or was he more? It was hard now to remember. Before another five years he must have worked out a mode of life calling for cunning and perhaps strength, but not demanding speed of foot and youthfully swift reaction to danger.

His mind made up, he returned, stepping over the mud mounds that had once been houses, balancing from stone to broken stone and by long habit listening with strained attention before he crossed the open weed-covered street. Of course he'd add his own precautions to the Oxonian's carefree manner of life; never use the same lair for more than a few days; not leave, as the Oxonian did, plain beaten tracks that a child could have easily followed.

The hunter called aloud before starting to wriggle through the passage in the rocks, heard a reassuring "Don't trouble to ring the bell, just walk in."

It was almost shameful, the vivid pleasure at using one's voice again, at producing actual words and sentences, at being answered and understood.

The first thing was to clinch the bargain, but his host held up temporizing hands. "I should like references first. Before letting an estate one always demands references. I'm offering you the entire city of Stamboul, on both banks, if you like, though I usually keep to this side."

Stamboul? That was a pleasant touch. Even cities had names again now. One got the feeling that civilization was not entirely dead, gone forever.

"I? Oh, well . . ." The hunter gave a brief sketch of his wandering, but hiding nothing of the murderous cruelty, extenuating nothing.

"Rather a conventional life, don't you think?" asked the Oxonian. "I'm not sure whether you'd be happy here; it's so secluded. By the way, how did the Great Disorganization start? I missed all that, you know. I left England just as one of the later air raids had liquidated the

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Civilian Administrator and all his emergency staff of government."

The hunter, frowning, thought back into those distant days. The air strategy of "offense-not-defense" had been imposed on both armies and navies with the result that nations abandoned their border defense lines, preferring invasion of enemy country to defense of their own, even taking pains to avoid giving battle.

"I know that art," said the Oxonian. "I was in the Foreign Office as an extra attaché at the time. The idea was to cut off the enemy army from home supplies, to occupy the enemy's armament-production centers, dislocate his transport and destroy the ground organization needed by his returning planes. But what actually happened?"

"The strategy was good," said the hunter, "that's all. It worked. It worked everywhere. All countries had the same idea: the perfection of organized disorganization, of carefully thought-out and long-planned destruction of every vital necessity of the enemy country. And it certainly worked."

There was a long pause. Then from the man who had been a young F.O. attaché, "I'm beginning to see. But it takes imagination. So far I can follow only one line at a time, the destruction of communications, leaving people concentrated in rings around bombed-out cities, millions of them. And all the elaborate organizations which gave them water, light, food and their daily necessities gone, wiped out.

"Army corps dependent on long lines of communication for munitions, fuel, oil, food, and these communications gone. Even the fundamental agriculture dependent on machinery, fertilizers, oil fuel, not living on what it produced, but needing to exchange sugar-beets or rye or wheat or even cattle for the farmers' necessities of life. Everybody dependent on everybody else and communications gone. Really quite striking it must have been; I wish I'd seen it."

"But how, in God's name, did you miss it?"

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS a long story, casually, unhurriedly told. The young F.O. attaché grabbed from Oxford because of skill in languages and in particular his hobby, the different forms of the Arabic tongue, was under orders to got out to Egypt on a semi-diplomatic, semi-intelligence job. The Civilian Administrator, from whose office the order came, was wiped out with most of his staff. So his order stood, though its exact purpose remained unknown.

A military plane, perhaps the last to leave English soil, took a long hop to Alexandria. It landed him at night on a lonely shore, a goodly store of Egyptian currency notes tucked about his person, a tarboosh on his head and ghastly pointed shoes of yellow kid on his feet; footgear which he still deplored. Then the plane took off again. Surprised, when dawn came, at the unbroken stillness, the spy, if you like to call him that, looked at his map and started along a dusty road, intending to reach the city in the cool hours of the early morning.

But stench, unutterable stench, like nothing he had ever known before, forced him back. Then he remembered a rumor, one of those unverifiable whispers in a war-stricken world, that the Italians had given the Sultan's Government a ten-hours' ultimatum to hand over the Suez Canal and imprison the British garrison, under pain of merciless air attack.

A house or two showed traces of burning, but that might be from neglected kitchen stoves. Seen from the distance, neither the city nor its outskirts showed any signs of having been bombed. Gas was the Oxonian's first guess. But tawny donkeys with black crosses on their backs nosed about in search of food, chickens pecked in the dust, miserable little dogs slipped furtively into houses and slunk out with ghoulish mouthfuls. Gas would have killed all these. But germs, specially cultivated germs, that and that only could have slain the thousands of inhabitants and left houses, even livestock, intact.

He did not, at first, picture the whole extent of the tragedy, for he thought in terms of previous warfare in which a city could be wiped out, but not an entire countryside. With some iron rations still in his pocket he struck out, not by road, for these were dotted with evil-smelling remnants of humanity at which tore birds and beasts, but by a broad, well-tended railway track.

For by rail, if their planes were destroyed, the Egyptian Government and the British canal garrison would doubtless try to reopen communications. Railway ties all the world over seem spaced to discourage walkers, the sharp ballast of the track cut to ribbons the paper soles of the despised yellow shoes, the brimless fez gave no protection against the sun. The heat blazed down, struck upward again from the

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unshaded permanent way, and he found nowhere any sign of human life; deserted stations, unmoving signals; not so much as a telegraph instrument clicked in the silence. Once he smelled from afar off, and later passed, a wrecked railway train, whose dead or dying engineer had failed to slow for a curve. Here too the gorged vultures were busy.

"You know," said the Oxonian, "the imagination of man is a curiously limited thing. It can't, at once, take in the fact that all the inhabitants of a country have been wantonly destroyed. Anyway mine couldn't. I learned to live on weird vegetables which I cooked for myself. And as I crossed eastward to the Nile, the date season came into full swing."

By the time he'd reached Cairo the smell had abated, and the dogs, hunting in packs, were ravenously hungry.

"Of course you know now what silence is. But I hadn't penetrated Alexandria, and this was the first city I'd seen in which no wheel turned, no engine hummed, no door slammed and no voice spoke. There were books, magazines, everything to be had for the taking, but the silence began to get me down. Don't think of it as an empty city; there were taxis waiting in their ranks, hawkers' barrows stained with rotted fruit; shops were open with their windows displaying goods. It looked as though the town just rested in the heat of the afternoon. Somehow, that made the horror worse."

Then, apparently for humanitarian reasons, he had armed himself with rifle and ammunition from Kasr-el-Nil barracks and started to clean up the starving cats, dogs, horses and donkeys. Occasionally he took trips out into the provinces, first in a taxi which happened to stand outside the Continental Hotel, where he stayed; then just in whatever car took his fancy and had sufficient fuel. Geese, ducks and hens had multiplied and the water buffalo were becoming dangerous.

AT THE end of the first year, small groups of nomads began to filter in from the desert, and into Southern Egypt whole clans had migrated from the Upper Nile. Fighting developed between the two groups, and waiting until they grew weary, the young F.O. attaché imposed terms of peace, and imposed himself as a suzerain power by whom all future disputes should be arbitrated. It might not have been so simple had not a new enemy appeared, the Abyssinians.

These were preceded by spies, miserable remnants of what had once been white men, barbarously mutilated, but allowed to heal until at least they could walk—Italians, who were suffering for the earlier crimes of their country. The attaché caught several and, in mercy, killed them.

Followed two years of actual war, but of the older and light mountain-gun variety, limited from the start by shortage of ammunition. At last it was necessary to make terms, and the F.O. man, partly, perhaps, as a protection of his protégés, became, under the Abyssinians, the Governor of Northern Egypt.

"A strange business," he volunteered, "because really the only thing I had to offer was a trick memory for languages. We were building up quite a nice little civilization there, without, of course, any communication with the outside world, and very poorly off for mechanical contrivances and things of that sort. I could write an interesting thesis on the adaptation of the nomad-clan system to the needs of settled agriculture. But then I got in a religious controversy. Solipsism, as a philosophical tenet, would have taken the fanaticism out of both animism, which the desert people cling to, and the quaint Abyssinian Christianity. But they weren't," he said sadly, "quite ripe for it.

"I got them to admit it was heterodoxy, not heresy. But quite politely I was escorted to the edge of the Palestine desert and told to go. If I'd known, as I know now, that there was no other civilization, I should not have gone. As it is, I'm returning. So glad you're taking over from me here."

In after years the hunter was to consider those two days, living on dates in the ruins of Stamboul, as the strangest in his experience. The Oxonian had been, at one time, a student of the Crusades; he could have drawn a series of maps, none of them more recent than 1500, of the whole of Syria and Palestine.

And the hunter explained scores of systems of attack and defense, gave intensive instruction in the art of stalking, in the manufacture of bows, in all the hunting craft needed in the new savagery. And together they laid the Oxonian's plans. . . .

On the last day, as they shook hands in parting, the Oxonian asked suddenly, "Why don't you come too?"

The hunter, almost without hesitation, picked up his bow and quiver. "Right. I will."

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Among the barren hills of Asia Minor they struck an early blizzard and snow. The sheep, never more than half domesticated, were few and by now quite wild. In the hands of man sheep may be fools, but in their natural state they are the most unapproachable of game and it was all that the hunter could do to bag enough to keep the two of them alive. Great was his relief to get down to Syria and the warmer shore of the Mediterranean.

When food must be sought almost daily, when elaborate time-wasting precautions must be taken against attack, the rate of travel is painfully slow. Full winter caught them in Syria, caught and almost killed. Cold wet spring in Palestine was nearly as deadly, and the rich black soil of the valleys made every step sink as into a quicksand. Early summer found the hunter still fit in body, fertile in resources, the Oxonian thinner, more worn by the hardship, yet insisting on long detours to examine the ruins left by his pet Crusaders. So far all was well, all had gone according to plan.

But the real crux of the problem would be the actual arrival in Egypt.

Such solitary savages as were left over from the citified Arabs, Jews and Syrians were easy to cope with. The Oxonian strolled ahead, acting as decoy; when an enemy closed in on his tracks, his attention naturally on the prey ahead, the hunter closed in behind and dispatched the enemy in what the Oxonian referred to as the "blunt Cambridge manner." By way of variant, and if the bait failed to attract and the enemy slipped in behind the hunter, the decoy would swing back in a cautious semi-circle behind the enemy who was stalking the hunter.

THE Bedawin of the Sinai desert would give no trouble, the Oxonian was convinced. "You see, old man, our civilization never touched them, except for a few rich ones who bought cars. Remind me, when I get back to Egypt, to deliver a lecture on the influence of the stranded Buick cars upon the growth and shape of sand dunes in Sinai.

"But that is merely parenthetical. The Bedawin still have their flocks, their families, their tribal organization. We, the once urbane, have nothing but our lives and our hunger; we're dangerous fellows in the eyes of the Bedawin, dangerous savages with nothing to lose. So, after a few raids on the broken-down cities, they've withdrawn as far as they can into the desert, and are making desperate efforts to breed back their almost extinct camels.

"But," he said, "as for the Egyptian frontier guards, I trained them myself and they are going to be dangerous. However, I don't suppose we'll encounter them this side of the Suez Canal."

It was agreed that when the time came neither should hold back for the other, but each should follow his own inspiration of the moment.

Then disaster fell upon them, fell from the bare scorching sky, and, as it seemed, above a desert utterly empty.

They had reached Gaza by early summer, and found with regret that the figs were as yet unripe. Thence, and against the hunter's training, they headed directly toward a tel, a large mound or small hill, which made a good landmark on the edge of the desert.

The Oxonian claimed to know this land backward and forward, so many times had he gone over the map planning an archaeological trip for his next long vacation. So, leaving the Oxonian to wash his ever-immaculate loin-cloth in the sandy bed of the Wadi Ghuzzee below, the hunter strolled casually up the grassy side of the hill. The practice of years should have warned him at least to approach it downwind, to have an arrow notched on his bowstring. Then it all happened at once.

Two arrows only he loosed before something struck him violently to earth. As he lost consciousness he felt a hot pain in his right side.

When the pain returned it was dark. His mind crept slowly back. An attempt to move made him dimly aware that a spear pinned him to the ground. Still in merciful half-consciousness, he drew his knife and hacked away at the slender, polished shaft, just above the flesh, clinched all his will to one purpose, jerked free of the buried spearhead and fainted again.

Before dawn he had crawled and rolled down to the Wadi. Thirst gave him strength for the task and in his mind was the hope of lying up in whatever cover the reeds might afford; scarcely a considered plan, for anyone might follow his sprawling trail. He sought water and cover as would a wounded animal. During the long scorching day which followed, he had no connected thought. But at night he crawled back on elbows and one knee, the other leg dragging, to recover his bow. Though too weak to use a knife, he yet might have some means of defense.

No trace of the Oxonian, only the two

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men whom the hunter had killed; broad-faced Negroes, not robed like Arabs, but garbed in tanned goat-skin loincloths and leather sandals. Their weapons had gone, had been recovered, probably by their comrades, but their heavy circular shields still lay beside them. Hunters carried no shields. Shields meant soldiers and an organized state, however barbaric.

In later years he liked to imagine that the Oxonian had drawn the other soldiers away in pursuit, had skillfully evaded them and found his way down to Egypt. But the only facts of the time were that he ate the bodies of those two dead soldiers, fighting the vultures for his only hope of life; gained enough strength to clean and treat his wound and to face the quite impossible task of retracing his steps northward.

A MAN who could barely walk had no reasonable hope of life in a world where each man's hand was against his brother. But if vultures could eat they could also be eaten. Unable to stalk his game, he let himself be stalked. It did his wound no good to lie out in broad midday, unmoving hour after scorching hour, till at last the wings whistled overhead and the disgusting birds flapped noisily to a landing. Nearer and nearer they waddled, perhaps no more than a pace an hour. Till at last, swiftly bending his bow with what weak force he could, he loosed an arrow before the birds could rise again. He seldom missed.

For long it seemed as though his strength would never return; a few hundred steps were like a mile and he knew, and dreaded, that his senses would be too dull to warn him of danger. Then the figs ripened and for a month he lived on little else; they were a relief from the vulture meat. During that time his wound healed to little more than a permanent limp. But not till he killed his first man did hope rise again.

And even so the need for food and the ability to kill balanced each other on a knife edge all through the long journey back to Stamboul. When he arrived there it was the wrong season for dates, and he had no thought of stopping. Anyway it reminded him of a temporary fellowship and the momentary hope he had cherished of reaching Egypt and living again a life that was civilized, or at least organized. He was back now in the timeless despair of savagery. As he had lived, so must he continue to live, but this time substituting cunning for speed of hand and eye and foot; staving off the end but knowing the end to be inevitable and no longer far distant.

Up to the time of his wound, the hunter had taken life as it came. He had not been able to change conditions by worrying over them; all that was possible was to adapt himself to them. But now he took upon himself to worry over the future of the human race. Perhaps this altruism developed not so much from his own weakness as from his association with the Oxonian whose name, incidentally, he had never heard. He more than suspected that it was not from the selfish motive the Oxonian asserted that he had abandoned the safety of Stamboul for the dangerous attempt to re-enter Egypt. And if the other man had a duty to the race, then he, the hunter, also had one.

But what was this duty? The question began to prey upon him.

Mankind could not start again on the upward grade until it had begun to organize once more into groups or families, while each man had to live upon the flesh of his fellows. Mankind could not abandon cannibalism until wild game became more plentiful, and game would not increase till humans had yet further decreased in numbers.

In no previous breakdown of civilization had the human race been beset by such difficulties, and if the nadir lasted more than a lifetime there would be no one living to hand on the knowledge of even so elementary a process as fire-making or the roasting of food. Man, under the new and additional handicap of an enfeebled frame, poor teeth and ineffective senses would need to start again at the very beginning, crawling upward through the long ten, twenty, fifty thousand years or more of hunting, pastoral and agricultural existence.

Often his mind returned to his host in Stamboul, his fellow adventurer. With a partner it would have been possible to evolve more elaborate and successful hunting ruses, and the gnawing hunger of loneliness would be appeased.

As he wandered on, of a sudden the plains of Southern Austria disclosed an army, perhaps two thousand men marching in a body, methodically cutting their way through the tangle of undergrowth. Marching whither?

A disciplined force, since they threw out rear guards, flank guards and scouts, with connecting files, posted sentries at night,

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even lit fires. They were weak and starving and the country around them was already filled with hungry, wolflike hunters. These soldiers were individually no match for the hunter and such other human wolves; the stragglers were struck down and killed only a few paces from their campfires, and the hunter made a discovery. By their appearance, by their type of spear, by their circular leather shields, they were of the same race as those whom he had killed and those who had pinned him to earth, leaving him for dead near the Wadi Ghuzzee.

Irrationally, that gave him a feeling of pity for the doomed army, daily struggling forward over a distance which one of the new savages could cover, effortlessly, in a quarter of the time. Perhaps it was a fellow feeling of a soldier for other soldiers, perhaps the result of their still cheerful voices chattering in some unknown tongue, their smack of civilization, however alien. Whatever the cause, the hunter became their invisible ally.

Not once but several times he prolonged the life of a Negro soldier by scaring him back to his fellows just in time, before one of the human wolves could strike. Also he set to work to thin out the wolves themselves. To justify this murderous sentimentality he reminded himself that the sooner mankind was pruned down to a few solitary shoots, the sooner it could spring up again, perforce abandoning its cannibalism and once more repeating its slow progress upward on the spiral.

Thus he no longer slew for need, but as a weasel slays, ten times his need for food, without even the weasel's instinct of bloodlust; but coldly and with great cunning. One body was bait for another body; all his old and tried ruses he put into effect, invented new ones.

Thus, he exaggerated his limp when he thought an eye was upon him, falling to the ground as though exhausted, dragging himself with difficulty, for verisimilitude casting away his knife as though past all sense of what he was doing. At last, and when he was just about to be lost to view, he would drag belly flat upon the ground, inching along. Then, out of sight, would spring to his feet, run swiftly, silently back in the old half-circle ambush.

So wolf-turned-watchdog aided the unsuspecting little army. There were signs that for lack of foodstuffs they too had turned to cannibalism, perhaps drawing lots for the next victim. Somewhere in the center of what had been Germany, the last remnant melted away and the hunter was left frustrated, lacking a purpose, the watchdog deprived of his flock.

In the empty world the incident of the lost army dwelt long in his mind. Possibly some Negro despot had sent them forth as an expedition to explore the unknown, and they dared not return to confess failure, like Sataspes, the noble Persian sent out to sail round Libya, and perhaps they feared a similar fate. Was their ruler some daring thinker who, knowing the breakdown in Europe, guessed that something, some tribal organization might still remain among Laplanders or Eskimos, who would have been protected by their snows as the Arab had been guarded by his desert? Certainly the army had marched as though with an objective.

For a while the hunter dallied with the thought of fulfilling their frustrated purpose; he might still have something to contribute to a primitive Arctic culture. But he knew too well the difficulty of sustaining life, even in Europe. For years he had trained mind and body, yet death by starvation was always just around the corner. A walrus hunter, no matter how skilled, would not survive a week in savage Europe. How then could he himself hope to exist in the highly specialized life of the Far North?

To give what he could to civilization had now come to be more important to him than life itself. Yet time after time he had had to abandon hope. He would have gone back now to the chateau if there had been any chance of finding it in that barren wasteland; for there he might recover something of his purpose. So he felt; but with his reasoning mind he knew the sentiment false.

Instead he turned sadly south.

OUT of curiosity, and because he needed an objective for his wandering, he sought out the now obsolete concrete defense lines which Germany and France had opposed to each other's attack. Underground and carefully hidden by the builders, some now would be flooded by water or silted up, some closed by steel doors which modern man could not open; all would be closely hidden by encroaching vegetation.

Forests had long since started their slow march down the valleys; hedges crept inward upon fields. Young sapling forests offered less obstruction to his travel than the scrub and bramble of a few years back. Occasionally now the hunter killed a wild

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pig or goat, but against his better judgment, for it was to the ultimate benefit of civilization that mankind should be thinned out yet further, beasts allowed to increase.

He deduced the position of the defense works by recalling his dusty remnants of military knowledge and planning where he himself would place them. He wanted to know how the pendulum of human habit had swung, for these frontier defenses had been man's counterpart of rabbit burrows. For a time, he thought people would seek the shelter they afforded, others would see their tracks and lie in wait for them. Still others would stalk the hunters. And then, quite suddenly, the places would seem too dangerous, and as though at a signal would be deserted. Only, later, the same cycle would be repeated.

Then he almost stumbled upon some remnants of rusty iron in a thicket. Farther west there'd been a landslip down a steep bank, and a steel and concrete tube about ten feet in diameter stuck out, exposed on the slope; one of the many entrances to the long, military ants' nest. Now he had his direction, it was easy to follow.

A recent and well-beaten path, a human path, brought him up short, shocked something inside him, and he retreated back into the untrodden bush.

Here he found another track. By now he had himself in hand. The two paths were not like the old-time right-of-way between, say, the village pub and the village church, worn like a little concave channel across the fields. On these new paths people had walked as though on stepping stones, with a stride a little too short for a grown man. A worn hole where a foot came down, a patch of grass, then another worn hole. Like a dotted line. There must be a reason for this.

An enemy, a grown man, naturally, would tread first in one hole, then missing the next hole, tread upon the untrodden grass, reach the hole but one after that for the next stride. Measuring parallel to the trail, the hunter compared it with his own natural pace, then knelt and with cautious fingers drew, from among the grass between two footfalls, a twig of thorn. So carefully had it been planted, so tidily the grass teased back over it, that, though he knew what he was seeking, it had been almost invisible.

An enemy would tread upon such a thorn, then, in the ordinary way, halt perhaps upon one leg to extract it from his calloused sole. But these thorns—each spike of them was black and shiny, coated with something. He sniffed, still uncertain. Poison from bad meat, perhaps, but more likely to be some swifter-acting vegetable poison. He had tried many times to make poison for his arrow tips, but failed, mainly because it called for slow boiling down into a concentrate, and that meant fire and danger of smoke.

These fortress dwellers had discovered, had made effective, some form of poison. And now he saw it all. The short stride was the safeguard for their own people; an enemy, his attention concentrated in his eyes and ears, his feet mechanically following the trail, would, either at first or later when he grew unconsciously impatient of the shortness of his stride, set foot upon a thorn and die.

He spent more than a day examining track after track, marking them in his mind as a pioneer surveyor marks the streams which cross his line, adding them up into an interesting network converging upon three places. Quite a small colony, at an estimate not more than ten in all; but half, he thought, were women; and in one place, on a sandy bank, threads of cloth, possibly from washing, and three most clear and definite footprints of a small child.

Not in the greatest extremity of hunger would he have harmed a single one of them. Here was a cell, a nucleus of people daring to settle, able to defend itself; they had fires, had gathered beech mast in the forest, cut grass for some purpose, doubtless to sustain some domestic beast or beasts which they kept in their military catacomb.

If they could continue to solve the problem of food, there was every chance that they might start to till the ground before the memory and knowledge of tilling had died out. They could use their organized strength to deal with the outlaw savages, like himself, who now infested Europe. If only they could start their agriculture, they would save the human race those tens of thousands of years from hunting up through the stage of driving flocks.

There was still wild corn, descendant of the domestic corn. As a gift, perhaps, he thought, the only contribution he would ever make to civilization, the hunter backtracked for nearly two weeks, guarded a little patch of rye from the birds until it should ripen, reaped its ears with his long knife, made a skin bag of the trunk of a wandering human victim, and plodded

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back with his burden to the defense line, the defense line of the new civilization.

He had taken reckless risks when he had waited in the one place for the grain to ripen, when he had stood out in the open to reap it, when, with the weight of the burden increasing the sound of his footsteps, its rustling dulling the acuteness of his hearing, he bore the precious grain dangerously back. It did not strike him as incongruous that his contribution to the human future should be enclosed in the skin of a freshly murdered human.

He made several journeys, each of course increasingly dangerous, and dumped the unthreshed rye in the middle of one of the most used paths. With keen satisfaction he noted that the troglodytes swept up each spilled grain, as this showed how highly they valued the surprising offering. It was the wrong season of the year for sowing and he could not wait to verify that his present was used for its intended purpose. As a last favor, he cleared the surrounding country of a number of hunters. Then, in a disturbing state of mingled triumph and despair, went his way.

He knew triumph because he had contributed something toward the future recivilizing of the land—despair because he, as an outlaw, had no hope of joining his strength and cunning to the defense and development of this brave little community.

Then homesickness or some homing instinct took the hunter down the coast of Belgium and, from Northern France on a clear morning, he saw the white cliffs of England. The picture held him for several days. He had no tools to hew out a boat, but with only his knife it would be possible to stretch skins on a light wood framework, tie on an outrigger and stand a very good chance of paddling across.

Of course there'd be tell-tale chips of wood, the sound of hacking and the betraying tracks he would leave while staying in one place to work—all this would be risky. But what made him abandon the plan was the knowledge that for hours he would be visible on that wide open stretch of water, and that on those white, apparently welcoming cliffs were keen-sighted men whom hunger had made merciless—new savages like himself.

On landing he would be ambushed. Men always lay in wait, watching from cliff and combe, not for a ship or sail, for nothing moved upon the ocean, but for those few miserable sub-humans who crawled forth at night in search of dead fish, limpets, anything that would keep life burning for yet another day, another year.

Early snow began to fall before he crossed over the Pyrenees from what had been France into what had been Spain. Of course he could have gone by the seashore route, but there were probably at least a dozen enemies, each with his specialized form of ambush, waiting to prey upon the seasonal migrants. Instead he followed the route of Charlemagne's army, dangerous because of its broken bridges, icy streams and deep snowdrifts. And three days of continuous snowfall that blotted out all landmarks. Famished, he dropped again onto the lower levels, was reduced to almost his last resource of strength, made a fortunate kill and came out on top again in this never-ending struggle.

Aimless, except for the continual search for prey, he worked farther and farther south, saw Gibraltar for the first time, recognizable but unimpressive from the mainland. And there found tracks, well-beaten tracks which showed that here, too, were humans living a communal life, holding in still-uncertain grasp the key to future civilization. But no chance, not the slightest possible chance of his joining them; the first duty of any member of such a community would be to kill on sight outcasts like himself. Doubtless the isthmus to the mainland was watched by day, guarded in some fashion at night.

The miles of gun galleries carved in the solid rock, with their storehouses and powder magazines, could hold a goodly number of people and to each one of these he would rightly be an enemy.

HE SPENT that winter in a state of gloomy lethargy, killing, evading the traps set by other hunters, but no longer with the minute care, the laborious preparation and skillful foresight which, in the past, had secured his survival. Perhaps, though his conscious mind would not admit it, he was by now seeking death as the easiest solution.

Even though spring merged into summer, in the warmer air he felt no answering surge of vitality. It was while sitting brooding and gazing out upon the cheerless ocean, his own unkempt beard supported in his hand, that he saw—

A moment ago the blue, sunlit waters had been bare, empty as oceans always were these days, had been so long, surely must ever be, at least till he was dead.

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The New Eve

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Yet now, around a promontory, appeared a gleaming white sail. Long habit drove him to cover among the rocks where a small stream gurgled its way down a steep slope into a still pool pent up by a sand bar. But before he dropped from view he had recognized the boat as no native canoe but an orthodox type of craft such as in the old days yachtsmen in their thousands had sailed from port to port all the world round.

And now he took a cautious glance. She was heading in, making almost for the spot on which he was crouching. A momentary fear assailed him. If civilized, the crew might have firearms. But a saving thought, if they were civilized, his meat would be of no value to them.

The little boat had come about and was heading out again. The hunter, now realizing that a formless hope had grown within him, felt that hope die in agony. But now the mainsail was down, the jib was being gathered in, and to the hunter's ears came the music of a clanking anchor chain.

A small human figure drew up a towed dinghy previously hidden by the hull; it seemed hours before he had it loaded. And now he was rowing ashore—for fresh water, of course. He must have seen the stream.

Supposing now some careless fool of a savage, someone like himself, should frighten away this stranger, this apparition from another world? The hunter, in his newborn anxiety, felt his hands shaking. Turning his head he took a long survey of the land behind him, no movement that he could detect, but the survivors of these many years were crafty in their concealment.

The nose of the cockleshell dinghy grounded on the bar of the fresh-water lagoon. The man shipped his oars, leaped out with the painter, and when another wavelet came, scraped the keel of the dinghy a little farther up-sand.

Now with his cupped hands he bent to taste the water, drank deep, then turned and splashed back to the dinghy for a small keg. Dare one go forth from the hiding place and call hello?

But a civilized man might have a pistol concealed in his shorts. And he might know no English. There was no chance, no shadow of a chance that the man would take a naked, bearded savage onto his boat. And the boat was a link, the only link with a miraculously preserved civilization. Cautiously, with a backward glance, the hunter slipped from hiding. Now was the time, while the stranger was leaning over the keg, forcing its bunghole under water. On swiftly silent feet he covered the short distance, notching arrow on bowstring. Sped the shot.

Even as the bowstring twanged, some remnant of sportsmanship made him hope that he might miss. But long practice and such short range made that impossible.

Struck squarely in the neck, the human figure barely twitched, just weakened at the knees as though tired, fell flat in the water. The keg turned gently, gurgling, and swept slowly beyond the reach of the outstretched, lifeless arms.

BOOK FIVE: The New Barbarians

CHAPTER X

THE HUNTER stood appalled. Not that his killing of the little man in white disturbed him; that was an everyday routine. It was hope, newborn hope so great as to be akin to horror, which held him in his tracks, bow still raised, as the body slid wearily forward into the water, and the cask, slowly turning and gurgling, evaded, like life itself, the limply outstretched hands.

Behind the hunter lay savage Europe where men must kill or be killed until at last the land should be all but rid of them, and the few survivors could repeat Man's age-long climb from a second Stone Age.

Ahead the incredible yacht, its white paint gleaming in the yellow sunlight, rode to anchor on the blue waters of the bay. The yacht in itself was startling, but what the yacht implied was dumbfounding. It meant that there still existed cities, administration, laws for the protection of the weak against the strong, an ordered mode of life in which clothes and the elaborate techniques of ship-building and navigation continued to exist.

The dinghy, the water-containers, the man's white ducks confirmed the evidence of the yacht; and the feeble disease-rotted victim proved it beyond all possible doubt; for nowhere in murderous Europe could such a weakling have survived.

Conditioned for many years to little but an intense perception of sounds, scents and tracks of pursuer or pursued, the hunter's mind could reach no farther down this vista of the future. It was a relief to turn to every day routine, to drag the body part out of the water, plant a bare sole on the back of its neck, and, grasping

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the arrow close up to the head, to twist and tug. But the soft point of hammered nail had bent on a vertebra, and refused to be withdrawn. The reed shaft drew off the shank; he replaced it in his quiver, pressing it down below the effective arrows so that he might not draw it by mistake. Life had long depended on making no mistakes.

The line of bushes on the foreshore was nearly beyond bowshot, but his eyes seldom left it as he gouged with his knife point, rubbed sand on blood-slippery thumb and forefinger, grasped the shank of the arrowhead and shook till the head rose from the sand with hanging jaw and nodded drunkenly. At last he dropped the precious point into his sporran pouch. A few light taps between two stones would make it serviceable again.

In agony of indecision he recovered the water barrel, carried it down to the dinghy and set it among empty kerosene tins. If only his mind would rise to the occasion and advise him what to do. His whole future, all his newborn hope of returning to civilization might depend on his next act, however slight. And he knew neither what to do with the body, nor whether to replenish all those tins with water. With an effort which was sheer self-torture he strained his thoughts out of their well-worn ruts of savagery and strove to understand the new problem.

Water—the ship needed water, so he on the ship would need it. With a flash of inspiration he remembered that cruising yachts do not tow their dinghies. So the fact that the dinghy had been towed showed that there had probably been an earlier attempt to go ashore for water farther down the coast.

Should he take the white clothes, as disguise to hide his savagery? But they were no more than patched and tattered shirt and trousers, now that he came to examine them more closely, and far too small for the hunter.

He had filled the last can, and still no plan of action would form in his mind. All must depend upon circumstances. The man was shaven; did that mean that he had companions? The dinghy had been towed; did that mean the opposite, that there had been no one to help him raise the boat to deck after he had last launched it? Where was the yacht heading, where was she from?

The dinghy would not shift, and he unloaded it, launched it, loaded it again, wading out down the slowly shelving beach. When at last he thrust the stumpy sculls into their rowlocks he knew that retreat was no longer possible. Attracted to the yacht, as wild beasts to the strange sight of a motor-car in the depths of Africa, hungry savages like himself would make the No Man's Land of open beach more dangerous to cross than any other spot in the world. Self-exiled forever from the land of death, could he make a good footing on the yacht which meant life to him, life and civilization?

Glancing forward over his shoulder, the hunter kept scanning the still empty deck. It seemed improbable that anyone would go on a long ocean cruise without crew or companion. At any time now a man might glance out, impatient for the return of the little man in white, and, seeing a naked savage instead, come on deck with a shotgun or rifle.

AS HE drew nearer to the yacht and read the name *Nirvana* on its bows, an unaccustomed smile lurked in his rough beard. Was the name an omen of success, for that would seem like heaven? Or omen of death?

The last yards of approach were as silent as creaking rowlocks would permit. To one who for years had been accustomed to stalk his quarry with infinite care, choosing each placing of a foot, each parting of grass-stems or bending of twig, his open approach in broad daylight was anguishing. But weaponless, for his hands were occupied with the sculls, his undefended back toward a possible danger, he edged cautiously closer. Despite his utmost care there was a slight bump as he came alongside. A moment to ship the oars, another to snatch up bow and leap on deck with—the name came back to him—the painter.

Then he heard a sound which held the hunter motionless, hand raised to arrow, painter clamped between foot and deck. A voice, a woman's voice. To the hunter, coming from the land of perpetual silence, it was unnerving.

The voice again, muffled, from below. It was English.

"Hold it, Geoff. I'll lend a hand." The voice was coming out toward the cockpit. "Don't be a mutt, you can't lift all." Then a head appeared. A startled "Oh!"

The hunter dropped hand from arrow. There must be no further stupid killings. He grunted a sound which was intended to convey, "He's dead. Danger! Savages!" and his bow pointed shoreward in explanation.

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With pretense of panic he made fast the painter, tore at the anchor chain with both hands, then jumped to the rusty winch and began to crank. The woman seemed to understand, struggled with the sails, then dropped into the cockpit and swung the tiller. Anchor on deck, he rushed aft to make sure of the dinghy and its water. Both would be needed on the long voyage—to where? Just in time he saw that the woman was heading the *Nirvana* for shore.

He grabbed the tiller, thrust her violently off. "Death! Savages!" He formed the unaccustomed words quite clearly now. "He's dead, this Geoff. Dead." Before the woman could get to her feet he tried to swing the *Nirvana* off on the seaward tack, fumbled ignorantly with the lines which seemed to control the sails. The yacht came up into the wind, lay motionless, hove to.

The woman leaped down into the cabin, slammed to the scuttle, was trying to bolt him out. To give her time to find weapons perhaps. . . .

His greater strength burst open the door. He grappled with her, quiver rattling on his back, pinned her down to a bunk, as suddenly released her and laughed.

Through the porthole he could see that they were no nearer land, and the slight breeze was offshore. The sea was smooth so the dinghy with its precious freight was safe. Now was the time to come to an understanding. Women could be dangerous, he remembered from way back in the days when he had known them. But once they were subdued they were often loyal.

"Geoff was killed. You will be killed if you go there." Proudly he fashioned the words. To make them clearer he pointed again to the shore. "Where you came from is safe. I will take you back there."

She seemed surprised. But now that she was free to move, she made no attempt to escape from the cabin. She plumped up a cushion behind her, and lay back in an attitude of exaggerated repose.

That set him at a disadvantage, stooping his height beneath the low ceiling, for her attitude clearly asked, "What now?" and he did not know the answer.

His mind worked quickly. There could be no one else aboard, or he or she would have been roused by the swing of the boat, by the idly flapping canvas, by the bursting in of the door and the stamping of the brief struggle. Nor had the woman shrieked or called for help. Good! That also showed that the woman was reasonable. A stupid woman would have yelled whether she could summon help or not. Good again.

The hunter sat on the gimballed table. It tilted and he had to recover his balance. To look foolish was no way to attain the normal advantage which he needed if a further and more brutal struggle were to be avoided. With a gesture he swung the woman's bare and nicely rounded legs off the bunk and seated himself in their place.

"Well?" The jerk had brought the woman to a sitting position, upsetting her mental with her physical poise.

He looked her over very carefully. The woman's expression conveyed nothing to him. He had sometimes raised the eyelids of his victims, or drawn out their tongues as additional precaution against disease. But it had been years since he had seen a face not gray or yellow in death, or distorted in fear and final agony. This face conveyed to him only faint surprise that this was doubtless how a face ought to look, must once have looked at dances and at tennis parties.

TAKEN as a whole the woman appeared the sports type, her skin darkened, her hair bleached by sunlight. Hair cut short, and shiny from much brushing, but not carefully arranged. Teeth good. . . . that was lucky indeed. Eyes healthily clear. Neck not very powerful. Shoulders unusually good. The cloth which covered her was carefully shaped, showing that the woman was skilled with her needle and painstaking. Also willing to look her best if only for the husband, Geoff. Therefore not averse to men. She was reasonably well nourished, though the muscles of her arms were clear cut and hard for a woman.

Aware of her restlessness beneath his gaze, still he continued his inventory.

Hands unusually hard and effective, more calloused than his own, for a hunter is no laborer. Whatever athletics she indulged in so vigorously developed both arms equally and did not neglect the legs. Stomach taut, perhaps with nervousness, muscles as spare as those of an old-time stage acrobat. Legs rather attractive womanly affairs, free from the scars of ulcerated thorn-scratches and bad food which covered legs in Europe, and visible right up to the brief, much washed trunks which had shrunk to a skin fit. Bare feet, arches good, which had been rare among the shuffling women he had seen last. Soles—he bent and lifted one for inspection—hard, but not horny and cracked like his

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own. When he let the ankle go she shrank a little from him.

"Well?" she challenged, in an obvious attempt to cover her slight betrayal of fear.

"First your husband is dead, and if you go ashore they will kill you too. So you must not go." He had said almost the same thing already. But it was difficult, struggling as though with a foreign language, to explain what was happening even now on shore. A dozen men, traveling more slowly, because more cautiously, than the yacht, must have caught sight of it and followed it on its coastwise course for days. One by one they would be stalking, listening, watching, crawling and sniffing their way toward the beach.

"Your husband. . . ."

"I had no husband. Geoff was my brother."

". . . is dead."

"You killed him!" She pointed to the hunter's hands.

Yes, there was dry blood on them, from extracting the arrowhead. Back there blood had not mattered in such small quantities, for its odor would scarcely carry two hundred paces down wind. Once, hard pressed by three pursuers, he had killed two, partly by sheer luck, then collected the blood of one in the stomach sack of another, and dripped it heavily beside his trail to delude the third into the belief that he was badly wounded. The trick had worked. His tricks always had, or he would not now be here. Though later, heavy with two days' gorging, betrayed by one of those hovering vultures which had grown common all over Europe, he had all but met his end.

But he must forget the past, and bend all that remained of his mind to planning the future.

"We must take you back where you came from—back to civilization." Words were still too difficult to allow him to argue, but if he repeated them often enough he might drive his point home.

"Back to civilization?" She laughed, but not pleasantly. "We came here looking for it!"

No. . . . She must be wrong. This wonderful boat, the cushions, the lamp hanging from a gimballed bracket of polished brass. Her appearance. Oh, she must be wrong. She must!

But if she were telling truth!

He must not show his anxiety. Must take time to think. To cover himself he gave a direct order.

"You must put out to sea. It is too dangerous here." He jerked her to her feet. Docile, if only for the moment, she went with him on deck.

She showed him how to trim the sails and get under way.

Side by side in strange companionship they sat in the cockpit, watched the land shrink behind them, silent even when they hove to to lift the dinghy aboard, silent until late afternoon.

When she spoke again her tone had changed. It was less frightened, less that of an enemy.

"We're on half rations, have been for want to eat I'll have to go below and lay the table."

He let her go. It would be impossible to watch her all the time.

The slight meal, mere dabs of this canned meat and that canned vegetable, was appetizing rather than filling after a thirty-six-hour fast, but he refused to take more than his share. Though she might not know it as yet, their future lay together, at least for a while; and comrades shared alike.

His moderation was noticed, and the woman's tone softened a little.

"We're out of oil for the lamp, so if we weeks. Geoff said. . . ." She hesitated. "Geoff said we ought to go on quarter rations until we could find this—this civilization. Now perhaps you'll believe me."

"Yes." He took a long drink of water, threw himself back upon the bunk. "Thank you for the food."

She clattered the plates, collected the knives and forks. Then unexpectedly, "Thank you for the water."

As she cleaned up he tried to sort his ideas. What did a man do after a meal? Smoke, but there was no tobacco. Drink port? None again. Read, but the light had almost gone.

Suppose this rocking should get worse, and he should be badly seasick. Would he then be able to maintain his ascendancy? Or would this woman put back to land, and get them both killed?

TO GIVE himself occupation he hunted through the lockers until he found a light hammer and a rusty bolt which would serve as anvil. Then, unhitching his quiver for greater comfort, he produced the bent barb and set to work, testing the effect of each blow by touch, since daylight had already gone.

It was strange to realize that, only a few hours before, this piece of hammered

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iron had been more valuable than all the gold which perhaps still lay in the vaults of the Bank of England. Not that the arrow point was so great a masterpiece; it could scarcely have been that, considering the disadvantages under which it had been made. There was still plenty of steel in Europe, rusting railway lines, bridges, massive girders, but all this store of material was quite useless to a man who dared not burden himself with the simplest tool, nor light the smallest fire.

This arrowhead, he could recognize it by touch, had been made from a nail scraped out of a thin gray layer of ashes which had once been a log chalet in Switzerland. Swiss houses had used fine big nails, sometimes too big. Just a slight difference in the growth and color of the pines had told him, like an archaeologist of old, of the prospect of a rich hoard beneath. After that he had set to work with all the secrecy of a convict filing his way out of prison, listening constantly for warders.

But now with each tap he rejoiced at the faint clang; no longer was he in the land of silence. Contemptuous of danger, for there was no danger, he and the woman had been speaking aloud, just as people had done in the old days. Even now she jangled the knives and forks back into a drawer, clattered plates back into a rack, clicked the tin cups onto their hooks. He could follow each of her movements. And now she poured the dirty water down into —he caught the sound of a pump—a real lavatory.

Silence for some moments. He was wondering how best to preserve bowstring and arrows from the sea damp. But he felt she was in the cabin again. He could hear excited breathing drawing closer. Her left hand touched his chin. Swiftly he jerked aside, grabbed at and found the other wrist, pulled her off balance. Something, by the sound a carving-knife, dropped to the floor-boards. A sob of frustrated anger.

The attack seemed quite natural, even praiseworthy to the hunter. He had half expected it, as she had so falsely thanked him for the water. Had he not killed her brother? Why then should the woman not kill him in return? But all the same it was foolish.

"Alone, you will die very soon. With me you may live a long time. It is stupid to kill me. Now . . ." his voice changed to command, "go on deck and do what is needed for the night. Sail or heave to, it does not matter."

His indifference was pretense. It would not do to let the woman know as yet how little he understood boats, and in the darkness he listened to the rattle of ropes on deck, and tried, unsuccessfully, to guess what she was doing. If she chose to get under way again he should be able to tell by the list of the boat, unless the wind had changed, if she tried to run for land.

The motion of the boat remained unaltered. Things were made fast on deck, new lashings added to the dinghy athwart the roof of the cabin, and she brought a loose bucket down to the safety of the cockpit. There was the sound of the hatch being tugged forward, a click of the bolt on the door, muffled steps on the other side of the table. A locker opened, something soft was taken out and dropped on the farther bunk, probably bedding or a blanket.

If, stirred by the continual closeness of a male, she were the first to be friendly, she would begin to realize her need for him in other ways, would be on her way to being tamed into an abiding friendship.

The hunter stretched out comfortably on his hard bunk. It was soft, sybaritic by comparison with the best that he had known for many years. Perhaps the woman hoped that he would ask for bedding, he who could sleep in rain, had even on occasion lain down for a brief rest in the snow. That was on his first southward passage over the Alps, when hunger had nearly killed him. This was wonderful, gorgeous. He drifted off into sleep.

". . . killed him?"

He was wide awake, hand on knife. "What?"

"You killed him?"

What a fool the woman was. "Yes."

Of course the arrow had been loosed without thinking. Perhaps that had been a mistake, but it was one which anyone would have made. And this woman must not misjudge him. "I killed your brother, but I did not eat him!"

"You did not. . . ." Horror seemed to choke her.

". . . Eat him. No." He misread her emotion, and thought that it was absurd of the woman to doubt him. She must realize, if she thought for a moment, that there had been no time. Even if her sheltered life had not taught her the folly of eating so diseased a specimen of humanity. It would be regrettable if she turned out to be a silly little feather-brain after showing so much courage and what he took to be common sense.

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THERE followed by the hunter's orders a week of seemingly pointless cruising, sailing coastwise southward during the day, standing out to sea for safety each evening. Without, he hoped, too blatantly exposing his ignorance, he refreshed some elementary notions gained on an undergraduate reading party on the Norfolk Broads, and discovered that the woman had no idea how to use the ancient sextant and navigational tables.

A mildewed and tattered Bowditch's *Practical Navigator* might have taught them in time what they needed to know, but without fresh provisioning a long voyage was impossible. The woman had spoken truth. Rations would need to be cut to a quarter, and would then last perhaps a month. No more. He cleaned out each locker, scraped in the slime of the bilge, restored spare sails, cable, examined mattresses, lifted books out of their racks. The woman's amused smile failed to deter him. Life had taught him to make sure, to leave nothing to chance which could be proved and verified.

"Sorry to disappoint you," she mocked, "but you've seen all there is to see. If I were you I'd go back where you came from. You'll die of starvation here. Write off your first attempt at piracy as just so much experience. Go back to plain murder. You must be good at it by now."

From long disuse words were no longer things with which he could juggle; but he had discovered a simple but effective form of repartee.

"The best way will be to wait until I am really hungry before I kill you, for your meat will not keep. What I cannot eat I can use as bait. Even if I catch no fish, that will have saved me more than a week, and with only one to eat the provisions it will save me another month. One murder, just one more, to weigh against five more weeks of life at least. No murder in all my years has promised such rewards." Reflectively he stroked his beard.

The woman laughed, laughed quite well. But he was interested to note that the hooks and lines were later missing from their place. Quite possibly, he reflected, she might dread the thought of death less than the picture of her body being cut into small pieces as lures to sharks.

Her attitude remained one of open enmity. That, he conceded, was natural to one accustomed to resentments, grudges, facile likes and dislikes and all the other emotional luxuries of a safe community. With concealed eagerness he awaited each sign that she was beginning to realize the need for co-operation if either of them was to survive.

He could plan nothing, merely drift upon the sea with rapidly diminishing stores, until the woman had told him whence she came, what the chances were of returning there, and what remnants of civilization had existed which had allowed them to keep the *Nirvana*, a store of canned foods, and even a little clothing. To ask her outright would be useless in her present frame of mind, and would even do harm by showing her the weakness of his position. It was maddening to seem within reach of some small outpost of men, perhaps the Azores, perhaps the Channel Islands, and have this creature's cursed obstinacy stand between him and the fulfillment of his dreams.

Enough to make him think of tying her to the table, holding a knife to her throat and making her talk. But that would be short-sighted, as he would need her help later.

And besides, the plan might fail.

Women were a strange tribe.

More to draw her out than to entertain her, he struggled to put into halting words the story of the insensate destruction of organized national life, and the lost people reverting helplessly to the inevitable cannibalism.

It was tiring to the hunter to talk, and after only a few minutes his mind became bemused; so the tale had to be given in brief installments. But it was worth the effort, leading her to tell her own story, as one canary vies with another to sing. Yet even when he had sketched the whole tale of destruction, from the first demoralizing bombings to the day when he had seen the sail of civilization appear once more upon the deserted seas, still she clung to her incredulity.

"But . . . but . . . oh, people couldn't have been such idiots! Each nation building up its population until only the most elaborate and delicate organization of supplies and communication could allow the land to support such hordes of people; and blindly, at the very same time, getting ready to blast to bits the delicate organization of a neighboring nation. Hadn't they ever heard that people in glass houses should not throw stones? Oh, men can't have been so mad!"

The hunter was mildly amused. "And yet you expect me to believe your yarn of the reckless dictator developing the special disease germ, and shipping it secretly to

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his minorities who were living abroad in America. And that these people, living in far better conditions than their brothers in Europe, were so short-sighted as to inoculate themselves against the germ, and then spread the disease all around them among their peaceful American neighbors!"

"But it's true, I tell you, it's true!"

His voice dropped to a deeper more persuasive tone. "I know it's true. I actually believe you. Why don't you try to believe me?"

It took an object lesson on the coast of Portugal to produce conviction. They rowed ashore, between dark and dawn, somewhere, according to the chart, near the mouth of the Tagus. The wreck of what might have been a boathouse or a seashore pleasure pavilion, now fallen from its ruinous piles, hid the dinghy from the shore side. Carefully the hunter reconnoitered a hundred yards or so inland, up the steep foreshore. Since the population had dropped from perhaps two hundred per square miles to less than one per two hundred square miles, there was little risk of chance encounter. And coming as they did from such an unexpected quarter as the open sea, none would be lying in wait for them. Though, as the light strengthened, the white hull of the *Nirvana* gleaming in the clear rays of the early morning sun would draw incredulous savages as light draws moths.

A signal from the hunter, and the woman, less inured to such method of travel, crawled painfully after him into a clump of bramble.

"I'll watch the south, you the north." He loosed knife in sheath and laid arrow on bow, in case it might be needed. "Put one hand against me, press once if you hear something, twice if you see something move. Stay in a comfortable position, as we shan't be able to move, or even whisper, until dark."

The hunter had chosen the place because his specialized memory still retained a vivid picture of the surrounding country. He had lain up once before, with a festering knife-wound in the shoulder.

In a while his musings, no more than a faint accompaniment to the functioning of his senses, dropped back and left his mind clear to analyze a warning signal. Somewhere, embedded among the sound of wavelets far below, of breeze moving to various faint notes through obstacles, of the chirp of slowly warming insects, of the rasp of a twig, the flutter of a leaf near his left eye, somewhere was a sound he could not identify. It was as vague as the rubbing of hand over hand, difficult to localize, but startling as a note misplayed at a symphony concert.

SLOWLY, with infinite caution, to avoid attracting notice, he slewed his head a little. The noise came from the woman, carefully, and, as she thought, noiselessly moving her right leg. Three times he pinched her arm sharply. She took the warning, the sound ceased.

Silence, unmoving silence, within the lair, as hour followed hour. The woman, he knew, must be suffering. But such suffering was so normal a part of the life he knew that he could spare no sympathy. Outside, the sun, slowly moving to its zenith, enriched and deepened the terrestrial concert. The undertone of the breeze had ceased. He was glad of that. If a storm had risen, calling them back to the *Nirvana,* it was improbable that they should have reached even the dinghy alive. By now, each following his own method of cautious approach, perhaps a dozen savages were working with infinite patience through the thick undergrowth. Perhaps two or three had converged, had become aware by sight or sound or even smell of each other's presence, and were now lying silent, each waiting for the others to reveal themselves. Through the day, unsleeping through the night, they would tensely wait, each hoping that the others had eaten and drunk less recently than he. Then one would stir, and the end would come swiftly.

Of course the approach of others might complicate the position. He had once seen no fewer than four savages thrown accidentally together, and had heard the only human sound for years, a snarling, rending, human dogfight. A day later, sure that no others had heard the incautious noise, he had crawled in among the tangled weeds and found the last man still dying.

One point the hunter had overlooked, for all his care. The physical impossibility of an untrained woman remaining utterly unmoving, utterly silent, for eighteen hours.

The woman gave just one flick of her hand to dislodge a torturing fly, and a savage, unseen within thirty paces of their lair, rose from his long belly-crawl and leaped toward her. He dropped to the hunter's arrow, casting his knife forward as he fell, then lived for hours exposed to

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the scorching midday sun, and died without a betraying groan.

The woman's eyes grew wise with horror as she watched the slow and painful end. But the hunter dared not risk the movement of a *coup de grâce*, and the woman had sense enough to resist any impulse to help.

In the blackness of the next night the hunter took his life in his hands, and drew off pursuit with the slow stumbling of a sorely wounded man making for fresh water. Assuming that possible listeners would know the only drinking-water pool, and move into position ahead to ambush the supposed victim, the hunter swung silently back again to the woman and the dinghy, pausing on his way beside the dead body.

Once out beyond the small breakers, he lay on his oars. No chance of finding the *Nirvana* until dawn.

"We had less than even chances of getting off alive. You did not know, but I did, for that was my life." It was a relief even to hear his own voice after retasting the eternal silence of Europe. "Do you know why I took you into such unnecessary danger?"

"I . . . I . . . I think I can guess."

"So that you can believe what I said about Europe, and learn to trust me. We may have a chance of life, though I don't know how or where. When the chance comes we shall need each other's help. I'm not proposing friendship. You will probably try to kill me because I killed your brother. That is fair. But that must be a private feud. When we face danger from outside we must each help the other. Do you agree?"

A long silence. Then, firmly out of the darkness: "Yes."

Light was growing in the eastern sky when she spoke again.

"You're eating . . . it!"

"Yes. And some I'll use as bait as soon as you return the fish hooks to their place." He scraped his knife on the gunwale, stowed a shapeless something under the thwart. "You'll have my quarter rations to eat today and tomorrow in addition to your own. Face facts, and be grateful."

He swilled his hands overside, wiped them on his bare thigh and started to row.

AS THE hunter pondered Ann's tale of her West Indian island he was forced to realize that any answer to the hope awakened at his first sight of the *Nirvana* nosing into the bay was indefinitely postponed. Their larder was too low. Long before he could learn to navigate, their food would be gone. And fighting down a new feeling of despair, he planned for the next day, the next week, at the most for a month ahead. The woman seemed to agree, and to be willing to help.

With a vague impression that storms might be milder and cruising safer in the Mediterranean, they felt their way like ancient Phoenician navigators coastwise through the Straights of Gibraltar. And by then the two had ceased to be nameless to each other.

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Lolling on deck in the sunlight, the twin incentives of hunger and peril removed from the immediate vicinity, Hugh the hunter was tempted to set aside thoughts of the morrow and enjoy today. Again there was no future, but at least there was a present. And the whole world had changed. Things had names again; places had names. Though all the rest of Europe might lie in furtive silence the *Nirvana* bore with her the extra-territorial right to words, to song, even to abstract thought.

Doubtless Ann would make another attempt to kill him, and of course he would prevent her if he could; but he faced the prospect with an indifference which, he saw, puzzled her. Her existence in the West Indies had been hard but safe. Nothing had shocked her out of the civilized belief that life is the one thing of supreme importance, death the worst evil which may befall. Perhaps it was not fair to blame the idea on civilization, but only on women. Women, more closely concerned than men with passing on the thread of life to future generations, would naturally magnify its importance, as does any craftsman the object of his special trade.

Where women attained to power in the nation, there you heard preached the sanctity of human life, slogans like "safety first"; and the glorification of peace simply because more people postponed inevitable death for a longer period of years. In nations where women were not in the ascendancy, the postponement of death was not considered the prime purpose of all human effort. Even the matriarchies, under which Ann had lived in the States, and he in England, dropped their delusion when war approached. For war was still man's specialized craft, in which women had little active part.

Whether it was he or Ann who set the right value upon life did not interest him, but only that his plan, when he made one, must, if he were to have Ann's help, allow for this difference in outlook.

Daily he and Ann held council, retailed what each knew of the present world, and each was forced to shatter with hard facts the fragile hope nursed by the other. The hunter's aim of migrating to the Western Hemisphere would be reserved as a forlorn hope since the place was to all practical purposes uninhabited. Scarcely a chance at all, Ann averred; for the *Nirvana*, though to the hunter still a vision of beauty, was to Ann a rotten hulk with paper sails; and, with rigging, both standing and running, as weak as knitting wool. It was urgent, she stated and restated, that they reach their final destination, whatever it was to be, before the autumn gales, and hopeless to attempt the Atlantic.

Europe, Hugh ruled out of discussion. Ann disposed of Africa. From Sierra Leone right up to Tangier she and Geoff had sought anchorage and water and provisions. Always to be repulsed with show of armed force.

"With what sort of weapons?" the hunter asked.

She was not sure. There were arrows, for Geoff had nearly been hit. Spears, too . . . in some localities.

"Shields?"

Yes, round shields. She remembered now. Yes, shields, she was almost certain, had been seen all the way from Sierra Leone to Tangier.

That was convincing to the hunter. Shields meant soldiers, soldiers meant organized authority. And if organized authority was set on keeping strangers out, strangers would be kept out. Their fair skins made disguise impossible. Nor could he blame the tribes of Africa for wanting no further contact with occidental civilization. The white races had set their peace upon warring tribes, but turned that peace into an intolerable servitude, with cold-blooded economic exploitation, and the yet more cruel imposition of alien laws, alien morals and even alien religion. The black man was right to reject them.

Experimentally the *Nirvana* tested island after island. Perhaps a peasant family might have survived, cut off from the chaos of Europe, and might welcome them. Ann stayed off in the *Nirvana* while the hunter searched. But the islands were deserted. Had a single island shown seed corn or vegetables, the hunter would have rid that island of humans, as one exterminates rats, and with Ann attempted a settlement.

Conscientiously he prepared her for the need for such cold-blooded slaughter. "The only function of a modern savage is to kill or be killed, so that in an empty Europe wild life may creep back again, and Man once more start upward in his climb, from hunter to herdsman, from berry snatcher to tiller of the fields. The faster we wipe each other from the face of the land, the greater our service to posterity, for the sooner can civilization return."

Ann demurred. "There must be a false premise or false reasoning somewhere, though I can't put my finger on it. Oh,

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Hugh! Why must you be like this? You were—it sounds silly, I know—an educated man. Why had you to kill Geoff, why must you go on killing, why is the world like this in your eyes?"

"I killed your brother because I was a slow-witted fool. That killing was utterly unnecessary, and easily avoidable. I did it as a frightened servant drops a plate, or a small girl blushes or stutters. There was no malice in the act; but such stupidity is worse than malice." Hugh stopped. He must not let this single action grow into a matter of importance either to the woman or himself. "But as to the other killings, if I were religious I should pray for greater skill, for divine guidance to lead me to more victims."

But such few miserable human specimens as the islands held were saved by the very lack of edible vegetation. Ancient gnarled olives, a few neglected fruit trees, a vine buried in the undergrowth here and there but not a trace did he find of corn or vegetables. Cannibalism seemed to have died out, but not before the women had been destroyed and with them all power of human reproduction.

On one island the three or four inhabitants seemed to have arrived at some mutual understanding. At least there were worn tracks leading to the beaches, snares for birds made from plaited human hair, broken snail-shells, and a lean-to of sticks and grass against what had been a cottage wall. But the inhabitant of the lean-to fled noisily at sight of the hunter after loosing an ineffective arrow, and the latter did not pursue. Doomed to extinction as they were, it was pointless to kill them, profitless also, since Ann and he could build nothing on such famine-weak foundations.

THERE remained the communities of troglodytes, naked, perhaps fireless, living largely on shell-fish, nursing their few ears of corn; the lowest form of human life, yet with one hopeful foot on the first precarious rung of the ladder of progress. Could Ann, could even he, endure such existence?

He told Ann all that he knew of them from careful observation in the past when, in desperation, he had tried to join them. For himself, he would prefer to take the *Nirvana* and their last remaining stores, and follow the northern coastline of Africa, raiding ashore by night for food and water. Perhaps the Suez was not blocked . . . the Orient. . . .

"But the older people on Gibraltar must be civilized," Ann objected. "The life will be hard; but don't you see, Hugh, we'll be building, among others who are building, who are rising again in the scale of existence?"

The older people, Hugh pointed out, were likely to be the most primitive of the old-time peasants. No other class of society could have survived the particular type of hardship they must have undergone. And she must not picture just a holiday camp. There were implications in the social and economic life which she had not grasped. Women were scarce, for instance, and many extraordinary circumstances could arise from that fact alone. "But what if we were married," she asked.

He would surely be killed if he were to assume the rôle of Ann's husband in a womanless world, he explained. She, as his wife or anyone else's, must run the dangers that beset the women of prehistoric times—she who had been disqualified by civilization for that arduous rôle.

It was mid-afternoon that they came opposite the isthmus and the burned ruins of La Linea. They anchored, and once more unlashed the dinghy, lowered it over the side. The hunter, glancing over the *Nirvana* for possibly the last time, regretted that he was to leave its touches of civilization, its paint, though blistering, its polish, its scribbled tables and desks, its feminine touches of time-bleached curtains over the tiny portholes. They went on deck. If they hurried they would be in time to start a fire with the burning glass.

They put little into the dinghy. That was on Hugh's cautious advice. If the community welcomed them, they could bring back a leading troglodyte, perhaps the leader himself, and sail with him round to the harbor on the southwest of the rock. That would make an important first impression. If, on the other hand, their reception were hostile, the lighter the boat the quicker to relaunch, and the easier for Ann to pull, while the hunter held off the attackers. For the same reason they beached the boat lightly, and stern on, ready for a quick getaway.

Ann would have lighted the smoke-fire, and then made straight for the point where they judged the old frontier gate had been between Spain and Gibraltar. Keyed up to her purpose, she was impatient of delay which seemed to her to verge on cowardice. But Hugh refused. Land once goat-grazed to barrenness had been overgrown with rank weeds and a

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sapling forest. Dangerous country to cross.

The *Nirvana* lying to anchor, and their rowing ashore in open daylight, must have brought them to the attention of some new European, hanging about to prey upon any of the more civilized people who strayed from the Rock. It was dangerous enough here on the open shore.

When Ann's smoke first began to rise Hugh's anxiety grew with the growing smoke. Bow in hand, bracer on wrist, arrow notched, he planned how he and therefore others too, would have made their final fifty yards of stalking. Beside the fire, kindled near waterline, they were reasonably safe; but each journey to high-watermark for more driftwood brought them within easy bowshot of five excellent patches of cover which an enemy could gain when they were out of sight lower down the beach.

The woman tended the fire, threw on wet stuff to make it smoke, shouted in the direction of the Rock and waved, threw on more wood, waved and shouted again and again, until her voice grew hoarse. She grew angry, whispering in cracked tones:

"Shout, Hugh! Damn it, shout!"

But the most that he could do was to stand there, arrow on bow, grimly silent, listening, watching, waiting.

Waiting. Still waiting, until both knew that for the moment their task was ended.

CHAPTER XI

WITH the last light of the setting sun Ann wrote her prearranged message in French and English, fixed it to a pole, called once more toward the Rock and pointed to the notice.

On board again they ate their scanty meal in silence and in darkness. Groping for his cup of water, the hunter's hand encountered Ann's. He patted it comfortingly.

"I'm afraid we've failed. This morning I hoped we would. But now I'm sorry. For your sake."

At dawn they were on deck, sitting, hands cupped to eyes, staring shoreward. Something stirred within the once British lines. Then slowly a small procession issued forth. They gave it time to reach its objective, the pole of driftwood with its written message. Too far off to see what the troglodytes did, too far to judge even by the gait whether they were male or female. Then eagerly Ann pulled the dinghy shoreward.

The procession had gone before they landed, all except one, a man, who rested as though asleep stretched out on the warm sand. No answering paper on the pole. Perhaps the troglodyte bore a verbal message. Ann hurried toward him, while the hunter covered the man with an arrow.

She halted, bent down. Then stepped suddenly back.

"He's dead! He's . . . his throat's cut. And there's writing . . . of a sort . . . on the sand behind him."

The hunter swung. Only the faintest sound borne by the offshore breeze, but enough to warn him.

"Hurry, Ann. Read whatever it is." Then they would know whether to make a swift dash toward the rock, or a cautious retreat to the boat. "Read it. Quick!"

"I can't. It's Russian, or Greek, or Hebrew. But the body. It's a warning! In case we couldn't read."

"Yes." The hunter thought quickly. "You've one more chance. You can make a dash for the Rock. No, wait . . . poisoned thorns or traps. . . . You'll have to take the dinghy. I can cover you from attack from the shore while you push off."

They raced down the beach together. He helped her launch, then turned about, eyes scanning the mainland, speaking over his shoulder.

"Row south as far as you can. Then come close inshore, but don't land because of the poisoned thorns. Call, wave, do anything you can to attract attention; though you won't need to. A woman must be worth her weight in threshed corn to the troglodytes. They won't harm you."

"And you?" Her voice sounded obstinate, blast her.

"I'll be all right. If I last till night I'll swim up shore and make them lose my scent. Then kill a few of them to teach them tact. Good luck! And. . . . Good-bye!"

"Hugh Fitzharding, gallantry is obsolete." The voice was close behind him, not back in the dinghy where it should be. "It's your turn to hurry. I'm going back to the *Nirvana*, but not without you. As the dinghy's afloat and drifting we'd better hurry."

Back on board the hunter had to face a new and stirring lesson on the subject of women. The *Nirvana* once more under way, Ann turned on him and rent him.

"I made a bargain, and I keep it." Hot with anger, shapely in her shorts and bra, she got his full attention. "I've forgotten the words, but they meant that we should

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face danger together. And we will. Together."

"I killed your brother. It was only fair that . . ."

"Fair that you should make a gallant but useless gesture, not because I wanted it, but because you wanted it. Fair that you should try to throw away our future . . . *our* future . . . for a ridiculous piece of masculine chivalry!"

Caught by surprise, utterly at a loss for words, the hunter could do nothing but stare. What had suddenly turned this woman, who had begun to be docile and amenable, into a cross between an avenging Fury and a hot-tempered nursery governess he remembered from his youth? Only in manner, of course. Furies and the governess were ugly; and Ann was slim and attractive.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking." Automatically she loosened, then made fast the sheets as he swung the tiller to the other tack. "You're thinking I'm ungrateful. But I'm not. I'm proud that a man, any man, should be willing to give his life for the sake of a woman he hates the sight of, whom he's loathed for weeks.

"I'm proud and I'm bitterly humiliated, though no man could understand that. You did it in the way a man, but no sensible woman, would jump into a river to save a dog he didn't care a rap about. And if I were that dog I'd bite him for his pains, for being so damned superior and altruistic!"

HER whole body was quivering. In a moment she'd be stamping her bare foot, or shaking a fist under his nose. But he was beginning to get her idea, he thought. Her next words confirmed the guess.

"If you'd done it for me, Hugh, because you were fond of me, because you thought I was a decent sort, I'd have joined those loathsome cave dwellers just because you told me to. Yes, I'd have been fool enough to do even that. Women are made that way. But when you did the dog-rescue act on me. . . ."

"I see. Motive seemed all wrong. But it was not really." He set himself to explain. "If I said that you were the most interesting woman I had spoken with in years, and the most attractive, that would just sound ironical, as I've met no others. But put it this way: For years I've had no friend, no human acquaintance. I meet with one in this luxurious yacht, for it seems incredibly luxurious to me, talk with her once again, sit opposite her when I eat what she has cooked for me, and am never more than a few feet away from her day or night. Isn't it natural that I should think the human rather wonderful, whatever she was?"

"Whatever she was! I see, you make your point painfully clear at last!"

"No, Ann, you don't understand. . . ."

"Oh, I understand all right. I always did. And now let me explain in a way that even you should understand." She withdrew a pace, leaned as though weary against the coaming of the cockpit. "A savage came aboard the *Nirvana*, a murderer and, I thought, dangerous. I tried to kill him; partly to avenge Geoff, since there was no law left in the world to punish; partly to protect myself, for the same excellent reason. Then I discovered that the man was no savage, no danger to me. And if I killed him I should be all alone in the world. You know what that means, even to a man.

"He killed Geoff, quite painlessly; and Geoff would have died very soon, and not so painlessly. But the guilt was there; and in early laws such a murderer was handed over to the family of the murdered man. I was all the family Geoff had left. So why should I not accept your help, your companionship, anything which you cared to offer, in substitute for my brother whom you killed?"

The hunter glanced at the sails, then at the sun to ensure he was holding to his course. "Fair enough."

"Fair enough!" Ann came upright with a jerk. "Who cares if it's *fair*? Must you always be balancing things? Can't you hate, can't you love? Are you no more than a machine, a cold efficient killing machine?"

"Probably not. We had to be specialized to live. Probably in no time or place has competition been so ruthless. Five hundred million of us, for the war had killed relatively few, all needing to eat, with nothing to eat but each other. Men, women and children. . . ." He would have continued but Ann cut him short.

"What do I care for the five hundred million! They're finished, all but two; you and me. Nobody matters but us, any more. Not vengeance, not ambition, not hope itself. Nothing left but us two, and food perhaps for a fortnight. That's why I'm offering you . . . friendship."

"Friendship!" He let go the tiller. The *Nirvana*, with a weather helm, came up into the wind, her canvas slatting. Rough-

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ly he caught the woman by a bare shoulder. "Friendship? I had a friend in Stamboul once, but he was just another man. And he died. Do you mean it?"

She nodded.

He missed her questioning glance, gazing past her to the south as one who saw visions. Friendship? That was not her offer, he was sure. But that simpler relationship must suffice for the present. Must suffice whether she liked it or not, in her own interest.

Two women he had loved, in quite different ways. And they had died. Even those other nameless ones who had joined his wandering gang and pressed themselves upon him, hoping by that means to get an unfair share of the food, even they must now be dismembered skeletons, their bones scattered like unwanted toys over the face of Europe, unburied and unmourned.

Love, under the conditions, had proved disastrous. But friendship would bring hope, add strength to a partnership.

"Friendship!" He tasted the word anew. "If we are friends we still may live . . . must live!" The hunter put over the tiller, ducked as the boom swung by. "And our only hope of life lies in Northern Africa."

Her arms, which had gone out to him, dropped to her sides. "I'll lay supper." Her voice was dull, mechanical. She turned and went below.

WITHOUT a chart, and without any mental picture except that Africa was roughly pear-shaped, and perhaps bounded on the Mediterranean by the Atlas mountains, Ann and the hunter groped along its northern shore. On the long hot mornings and afternoons they bickered amicably as to the positions of Tangier, Tunis and Tripoli, and, agreeing that Algeria was probably the biggest territory, remembered that ancient Carthage stood somewhere about the middle, say one thousand or fifteen hundred miles from their starting point opposite Gibraltar.

Geoff's battered old telescope, cleaned of salt spray and with its object lens replaced, showed them vivid white villages and even towns shimmering in the heat haze against backgrounds of rich green. Day after day, whenever they stood in close enough, these signs of civilization beckoned them. Pepole could be descried, clothed people, but whether they still lived the life of their fathers, or now squatted among unappreciated ruins of past grandeur, the telescope could not reveal.

Food running short, the hunter went raiding, but now in civilized style, returning with the dinghy loaded to the gunwales with varied produce. On the first trip Ann's guiding light, a saucer of human fatty oil with a cotton wick, all carefully sheltered in a riding light, revealed a dead goat, a live goat, a hand-woven sack of barley, bundles of millet still on the stalk, and much firewood.

He handed the stuff up on deck, and while Ann stowed away he lowered the living goat down the hatch to where the cable was stowed, untied its legs, and spread millet before it.

Ann, alternating between kindling a fire in the small stove and grinding grain through an old-fashioned coffee mill, welcomed him to the cabin like a returning hero.

"Some women may sell their souls for ermine and diamonds," she looked up to laugh, "but give me a fried goat chop, and a bowl of barley porridge. You didn't manage any sugar then? It sounds ungrateful to ask, but I'm ravenous for something sweet, and I'd sell your soul as well as mine for a pound of Demerara."

"Sorry, no. And I'd planned to grab some native clothes."

He started to whet his knife before going on deck to dismember the dead goat.

"By the way, I wanted some chickens, as they'd be easier to keep on board than a live goat. But they set up such a cackle that I lost my nerve.

"I always suspected that Cambridge gave one too narrow an education. No murder, no chicken stealing in the whole curriculum. I'll send my sons to a more modern establishment." He slipped the precious whetstone back into his sporran and went on deck.

They put two days steady sailing between the scene of their theft and their first attempt at open landing. They chose a big town where religious fanaticism or xenophobia might be expected to be less than in a small village. The gathering crowd, gowned and turbaned, all men apparently, showed signs of excitement as they rowed in to the boatless, shipless bay. But as they reached the inner harbor, looked around for landing stairs and a ring in the high concrete wharf, the tone of the crowd became menacing. There was no laughter, no cheery shout from acquaintance to acquaintance, or buzz of interest. Only a low muttering.

"I don't like it, Ann. No children, and no women. Nobody in authority." The

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hunter was watching over his shoulder as he rowed.

"Let me go first. They're civilized folk and won't hurt a woman. Give me a couple of minutes to grin and look friendly, pat a child's head if I can find one. Then make fast and follow me up the steps." Before he could protest she had leaped, stumbled on the slimy stone, was climbing.

Stones, a stick or two, rubbish missed Ann, too close under the wall, rained down upon the dinghy; a crowd, however unprepared, is never without missiles.

The hunter called a warning, yelled unheard in the uproar. A man in a blue robe peered down over the wharfside, balancing stick or light throwing spear in his hand. Then, as Ann came within reach, thrust downward. . . .

An arrow twanged from the hunter's bow. Too late except for vengeance.

With a leap he was out of the dinghy, gathering Ann's body in his arms as it slithered down the steps. Hastily he spurned the body of her assailant from his path and into the sea and was back again in the boat before the crowd had decided on its course. He propped Ann hastily in the stern, swiftly flicked three arrows into the attackers, forcing them back from the wharfside, and winning his freedom at least for the first few dangerous strokes.

Beyond stone cast he dropped the oars, gave the wounded woman his attention. Slender almost as an arrow, the spear had pierced the skin back of the right shoulder, traveled downwards and outwards, skewering the right arm to her side. Barbed for its first eight inches its extraction was difficult, too difficult for the moment, with the risk of sudden hemorrhage to follow. He snapped off the wooden shaft. That was the best he could do to ease her. Then he fell to the oars again.

The crowd was streaming out, racing for the mole which closed the outer harbor. It had farther to go, but strain as he might at the oars, it was there before him, at the narrow entrance. Again his arrows cleared the way, though as he gained open sea a few shots cracked behind him. If the men with the firearms had been waiting in the first reception committee . . . !

Ann's eyes were wide with pain and fright. "Sorry, Hugh. My fault. Too impetuous."

"Don't worry. You saved our lives by taking them by surprise. So that the rest all happened before they could make up their minds."

SHE was silent again, though her face twisted in pain with each lurch of the boat from the mole head to the lee of the *Nirvana*.

"It's going to hurt like hell getting you aboard like this. If you can stand the dinghy another ten minutes I'll get the spear head out before we attempt it."

Before Ann could make up her fevered mind the dinghy rocked again under his descending weight. He held a phial and a tin cup. "I found this hidden away when I hunted for hidden food. Some sort of pain-killer, isn't it?"

Ann nodded, and winced. "For Geoff, when his end came. Now for me. Strange."

"What is a dose? The label's mostly gone."

"All!" Her voice was a harsh whisper.

"Don't be silly. You're not going to die. But you're going to be hurt badly." He measured out what he hoped was a dose, stirred it into the water with a finger. "Drink!" He held it to her lips. "If it's not enough you'll get more."

Anxiously he watched the effect on her pupils, cut a length off the painter, lashed her arms tightly to her sides. Then he turned her face down over the thwart. She made no sound of protest.

A moment to rinse his hands in the sea, to moisten pledgets of oakum. With better appliances it would be simple to cut out the shaft, which was merely skin deep in a long oblique thrust. But that would take too long, and call for stitching. He felt the soft flesh of her armpit under his horny right heel, thrust the heel down harder, caught a barb of the protruding point over the edge of his hunting knife, prayed or hoped . . . and pulled.

Drawn the way of the barbs, the shaft slid easily from the soft flesh. Ann's head bumped on the floor-boards and the hunter fell backward. Then hastily he plugged the wounds. Perhaps that was wrong. Perhaps they should drain. But that could be done when he had her aboard, in her bunk.

He lifted her like a sack of flour to deck, sprang after her, carried her below, unloosed her arms, propped her on her left side.

"Hugh!" A voice muffled in cushions.

He licked his dry lips in relief. So he had not killed her, had not poisoned her.

"Hugh, you hurt me dreadfully. You're still hurting me. You mustn't hurt me, Hugh, because I love you!—I suppose that's why you hurt me so. Was that why you killed Geoff?"

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"Try to get to sleep, Ann dear." He must get under way before dark. They were anchored dangerously inshore. If only she would let the dope take her under again.

"Is it wrong to say I love you? People, women I mean, say that sort of thing these days. But you're so old-fashioned, Hugh." Then defiantly, "Europe *is* old-fashioned, you know!"

"Sleep . . . Ann. Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep." In a quiet undertone he repeated, "Slee . . . p. Slee . . . p."

But it was almost dusk before he could go on deck, cast a glance round the still empty ocean, shake a helpless fist against the rabble of the white peaceful-looking little city. As he cranked the rusty anchor winch he pictured how he would have liked to lead a landing party, and plunder and burn. They deserved it.

If Ann died, and she might, from the treacherous attack of a mob against one unarmed woman, he would return; and, using the savage cunning he had learned in Europe, ambush the people at their very doorsteps, daily, nightly, month by month until by some mischance he in turn was killed.

Setting the *Nirvana's* bows to the north-east, he puzzled again upon the problem of these empty seas. Why did the people of that city, for instance, civilized enough to wear gowns and turbans, build neither boats nor canoes?

Three weeks later he reverted to the problem: "Why no ships?" There had once been Phoenician ships, Egyptian ships, Algerian pirate galleys and native canoes, built by Africans and manned by Africans without help from Europe. Why was it that now not so much as a dugout rocked off shore?

Ann, her right arm in a sling to remind her not to use it, a cape of weathered canvas over her shoulder to protect the last stages of healing from the sun, pulled in a line, and with her toes and left hand rebaited the hook with fish-guts.

She cocked her head on one side, and in almost forgotten Broadway slang applauded the feat, "Orchids to you, Miss Shillito! I wish I'd known this ladylike accomplishment earlier. I'd have been voted the most popular girl in my class, and the most likely to succeed in life."

Orchids! They brought him back to a stolen journey from Cambridge to London. A hot summer's night with thunder in the air. Theater tickets, a quick change in a friend's chambers at Gray's Inn, a borrowed white tie. The girl looking almost unbearably attractive when breathlessly they met. Yes, he had found just enough money left over from the dinner to buy her an orchid. A Noel Coward show, already many years old, but suited to the moment by its youthful hopefulness, its equally facile despair. The sense of strain growing throughout the performance, until it seemed that the silent audience was staring beyond the stage and its little players, held by a more engrossing realism. That the actors and actresses were using every shift and artifice in their profession to keep the attention of the people out in front, to screen them from a knowledge that something more momentous was on the very verge of happening; as though to keep them in their seats and so avoid a panic.

The play ended, taxis and hired cars rolled slowly, tensely. Nowhere to go for a couple of hours, until he must start back in a borrowed car, and climb to his rooms by way of the Fellows' garden. With new determination the girl reverted to their talk over dinner.

"I'm older than you are, Hugh, older by a whole two years, with heaps more experience in life. We're just on the verge of war, the war you've predicted for the past year. Though tonight was no more than one of those scares we've been having, some leakage of an unofficial warning of a possible 'lightning stroke.' Not even an air-raid alarm. When war comes we'll be separated. Separated perhaps for good. We're the age which war claims first for victims. Must I die, must you die, cheated of life?"

He had gone back to Cambridge half convinced. He would give up his Law Tripos Finals, they weren't of practical value anyway, get married, and let the future take care of itself.

But the "lightning stroke" had forestalled his deliberation. And she had been one of its many thousand victims. He had almost forgotten even her name, though at the time. . . .

"DREAMING, Hugh?"

He came back to the *Nirvana,* to two outcasts of time, one steering he knew not whither, the other seeking to catch fish to prolong two lives whose purpose neither knew. "I thought you were giving mature consideration to my query about why there were no ships or even canoes."

Ann turned a shapely head with gleaming well-brushed hair. "Does it matter? Perhaps when voyager after voyager took

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canoe to find out why the white man and his steamers and aeroplanes came no longer, they did not return; so the sea became accursed. Or perhaps. . . ."

"I wish you wouldn't take a turn of the line round your big toe, that way, Ann. It's infernally dangerous."

She smiled and unhitched it. "You see I do need someone to look after me. By the way, when can I get rid of the sling and the cape? I feel dreadfully overdressed."

Too late he suspected that the line had been hitched around her toe just to catch his attention. With rest, with the more varied diet provided by his raids on this cultivated coast and an apparent absence of any sort of anxiety, the woman was blooming despite her wounds.

Her stern self-reliance had been cast aside with the smoothing out of the hard lines in her face. Her free hand patted his shoulder whenever she passed, or laughingly tousled his hair. She was making herself dependent upon him too, and his pride, curse it, approved. If this were friendship, he appreciated it beyond reasonable bounds. If it were love on her side, as it was on his, she might at least play fair!

The cape he had made her had been trimmed by her one-handed with her scissors to make it cooler, or so she averred. Long in the back, shorter in front, managed, by some feminine trickery to emphasize the neat waist, the smoothly rounded hips, the gracious line through thigh to knee.

"Sorry I interrupted, Ann. You had a second theory about the boats, or rather lack of them."

She harked back to her last remark, not about ships. "I like being looked after. I've always had to fend for myself, and latterly I've been forced to take over whatever extra share of work I could sneak away from Geoff. This cruising is like a tired business woman's dream; idling about on deck sunbathing, a man to myself, no one else in all the sunny Mediterranean but just us; a foraging party goes ashore and brings me all that my heart desires, provided it's either goat or grain. You've been turning into quite a good cook with the limited stores at your disposal. I've always wanted to be a petted woman. . . ."

Hugh knew well enough what was in her mind. And he knew too the cost of romance in this ruined world. A storm might strike this cockleshell, or they might be foodless, waterless for days, or in one of those foraging raids ashore he might get killed. No one could foresee what predicament might be so many months ahead. If they lived.

That girl in London, so many lifetimes away, had felt the same way as Ann. "Don't wait!" she had urged. "We are the age which will supply the first victims of the war." And the first big air raid had taken her, leaving him long years in which to regret his well-meant caution. Yet . . . yet . . . surely he had been right?

As later he had been wrong. And again it had been the girl and not he who had suffered most. Far off in the North there was a grave, so pitifully shallow, hacked in the frozen soil. The next summer dogs and pigs must have violated it, unless Sergeant Conley had raised over it the cairn of stones which he had promised.

Through his brown study he heard Ann speaking again. "I've thrown myself at a man's head, and he's turned me down flat!" She managed a smile. "That ought to cure me, as your arguments ought to convince me. But it's no mere matter of right or wrong, of modesty or immodesty. I serve due notice that you're my lawful prey, Hugh. And now let's stop being all serious and adolescent, and get back to whatever we were talking about."

"About the lack of ships."

"Oh, that!" Ann half turned her head to give him a sideways twinkle of the visible eye. "I've scarcely given it a thought. Just so long as there are no other ships. I'm quite content."

BEFORE the war started, he remembered, many of the colonies in Africa had highly developed systems of government, run mainly by the natives, with little European dictation. When the governments of Europe had collapsed, the repercussions would be slight to an African peasant. There would be no more white governors, or more senior officials, no experts in forestry, agriculture, finance, railways, and all the rest, to replace those who had gone home to fight, or who had been killed off by the inevitable tropical illnesses. Possibly in some colonies, as in Abyssinia, the white men had been killed in revenge for past misdeeds of their countrymen. But that would not happen very generally. Railways, river steamers and motor transport would slowly come to a standstill; but the life of the people would go on.

It was an interesting guess. A few white men would be growing older and grayer in

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the service, unwillingly reverting to native ways, foods and even clothes, for lack of home supplies. Becoming much like native chiefs, they would be co-operating with the actual native chiefs more closely than ever before.

For lack of reference to colonial offices in Spain, France, Belgium and Great Britain, they would establish their own small embassies in neighboring territories to settle boundary problems, police problems, to facilitate trade, and perhaps to maintain their currency systems. No wordy politicians to start trouble, just patriarchal native rulers with white advisers whose jobs were to make a country prosper as any good business man nurses his business. The result a gradual coalescing of many countries into a loose confederation which one might call a League of Africa.

Ann considered. "Your theory seems to fit what we know so far. But how about South Africa and the white settlers on the East in Kenya and Tanganyika?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Hugh conceded. "They may have been as badly damaged by the war as the white races in Europe, in which case I guess the land is slowly being reclaimed by the natives to whom it once belonged. Or, if they weren't so badly damaged they may have found it worth their while, for the sake of trade, to join the other colonies." Anyway, they agreed one had to assume something like a league or confederacy to account for the uniform way in which she and Geoff and later she and Hugh had been excluded.

Ann hauled in a fish before continuing the discussion. "Since no one who left Africa for Europe would be likely to get back again, everything that smacked of Europe might be unlucky. Or they may have had taste or warning of the germs which your Stamboul friend told you had wiped out Egypt. Or the League or Confederation may want to keep as isolated as they can until they are organized for defense. I'd want to, I'm darn sure. And now to more important matters." She rose, handed Hugh the line to coil. "Guess I'll have to take over cooking again, and any other jobs I can find. I'm getting idle . . . and fat!" She rotated slowly, mannequin fashion, before him.

Hugh smiled and continued to coil the line. "We both know how attractive you are. Too damned attractive. . . ."

"A confession!"

"Extracted from the prisoner under duress," he protested.

"Yet still a confession. And for that the prisoner shall be rewarded by a little barley broth Nirvanaise, and fried fish from the hook of old Izaak Ann Walton herself!"

Cruising east and south they finally sighted land, which they took to be the north coast of Africa. Their supplies were at a dangerously low point and for days they had lived on half rations. In addition they had a series of storms, which were a severe tax on the ancient *Nirvana*.

Consequently their forays in search of food involved landing in the lee of unprotected beaches on which the little dinghy was twice all but stove in. Two people, strong of will and body, uniting to pursue a steady purpose, can achieve results all but impossible. Seldom did the *Nirvana* fail to make a little easting. Rotten ropes parted and were spliced, sails became mere clumsy fragile patchwork. Then the winds lifted, leaving only heavy swell which the ship rode with the triumph of a conqueror, a conqueror depleted of all reserves, whom surely another day, perhaps another hour of attack would have vanquished.

Ann and Hugh, bruised and starving, took turns in the sleep of exhaustion. Rested, but still starving, they repaired the badly battered dinghy. A gaunt staring savage rowed ashore, drove off a herdsman with hoarse threatenings, staggered to the dinghy so weak that he could barely carry the tall scrawny sheep he had killed. He drank some of its blood, rested, filled a water can at a stagnant but unsalty stream, scraped together a few sticks of dried grass and driftwood, and by miracle launched and returned to the *Nirvana* with his precious cargo still afloat.

That was the turning point. Seas became less mountainous, water and food more plentiful. As they slept, ate and rested, they returned slowly to normality. Ann and the hunter eyed each other with the mixed gratitude and respect of two well-proven companions in arms.

Ann broke a long blissful silence. "Until just now we've been purposeless, drifting. Now that we've ridden out that storm I feel that our luck has changed, and that we're on our way toward our destiny." She paused to stretch luxuriously, her feline grace returning with returning strength. "But I wish I knew where our destiny lay."

"Eastward, perhaps to Egypt," he suggested. "I suppose we ought to have gone south, down the coast of West Africa, but that chance has gone. The *Nirvana* couldn't face the Atlantic, and we might find trouble getting food if we went back

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on our course. People would be on the lookout for us. It's strange how guilty I feel about stealing. Maybe it's just a murderer's professional pride. I'm like a third-story man reduced to smash and grab!"

He grinned, a little shamefaced.

"But let's get back to considering our plans. The *Nirvana* is the basis of them, and she's only afloat by a miracle. She won't stand much more; not even careening to scrape the fathoms of trailing weed. Below waterline she's only held together by hope and barnacles."

Could they pass through the Suez Canal? The point was debated. No locks to stop them, as far as they could remember, and surely the desert sands could not yet have silted up the waterway to less than the *Nirvana's* shallow draught. Beyond, somewhere in the Orient, might still lurk some form of civilization, perhaps relatively undisturbed by the debâcle in the West. But how find food, and the essential fresh water during their passage through the desert isthmus, and on the barren shores of the Red Sea?

Meanwhile, still hoping, still despairing, they must go eastward, eastward.

CHAPTER XII

EUROPE had nothing to offer. Africa rejected them. Cruising ever eastward, they were, as Ann expressed it, "like Mahomet's coffin suspended between heaven and earth."

"Without visible means of support," suggested the hunter, "unless we claim piracy as our profession."

Smooth oily seas, light airs barely enough to shape the sails, and sweltering unchanging blue skies added to the strange and oppressive sense of unreality.

"Someone has painted us on a canvas." Ann put the feeling into words. "And we don't even know if we're going to be framed, or just scraped off again with a palette knife. Every morning when I come on deck it's the same picture. It's a relief when we stand inshore and paint a wavery green line between sea and sky, and just as great a relief when we rub it out again. Are we real, or aren't we?"

"We can't be." Hugh was busy with two frayed rope-ends, teaching himself how to splice more effectively. "Real people have homes behind them, and objectives in front of them. They're going somewhere, and we're going nowhere, scarcely even going. Even our stories of what happened to us in our travels are fantastic."

He trimmed the loose ends off the splice with his long hunting knife, hammered the joint with the handle, rolled it under his bare foot and looked at it with a critical eye.

"Not bad. But as I was saying, I'll soon find myself back in Cambridge and realize that the pictures of world chaos are due to reading law until after midnight; and I suppose I'll have my dull, student's life to blame for the tantalizing dream of being alone on a yacht with a lovely woman. It will be hard to go back to reading for my Tripos and wondering when the war will come."

Before noon the aneroid gave warning of a sudden drop in pressure, and a strong blow began to sweep down from the north, breaking the mirror surface of the sea into hissing wavelets. Ann, warned by experience, took no risk with her canvas, spreading only enough to keep way on the *Nirvana,* while Hugh added extra lashings to the dinghy, secured everything on deck, and went below to wedge tight their stores, and fasten locker doors. Then there was nothing more to do but wait, listening to the rising note of the gale, trying to persuade themselves that though the seas were every moment growing higher, the wind was perhaps beginning to blow itself out.

To the last moment Ann clung to the rag of sail, for behind them lay an unknown lee shore. Then she called to Hugh to drop the sea-anchor over the bows. Ann gathered in the last scrap of sail, and there was nothing more to do but wait. Wait and pump.

"If the gale holds till tomorrow we could drift twenty miles before dawn," Ann apprised the situation in a loud shout. "And we haven't ten miles of seaway.

"A well-found boat could make a slight gain to windward." She almost wailed her helplessness. "But our canvas is hopeless, and even if it weren't you can stick a fingernail into the mast just below the deck, and the stays would pull out too. If the mast went we'd broach." And still the storm increased.

Less than two miles—as they discovered later—not ten. And their first warning was the skyline of a big city, not half a mile astern, and growing slowly, fatefully nearer. The dinghy lashed athwart gave them some protection from the seas which swept over their bows. While one labored at the pump, desperately, feeling the *Nirvana* riding more heavily despite every stroke of the handle, the other with the

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battered telescope tried to discover a break in the white seas which exploded upward against what might be a breakwater of what once had been a harbor.

Ann's mouth opened in an unheard shout as she pointed. Just then a heavy sea swept the deck, shattered the dinghy with a blow like that of a steam hammer, seemed for an instant to fill the cockpit, then partly emptied over the stern.

Each knew what must be done. As Hugh fought his way forward to cut adrift from the sea-anchor, Ann had already spread a few yards of canvas, just enough to hold the *Nirvana* head to wind.

Then, judging her time between gusts and seas, she pushed over the tiller. The *Nirvana* heeled over while they held their breath as though the end had come. Then the ship came around, and, heavy as a sodden melon rind, began to drive for shore.

IT WAS madness, as Ann afterward admitted. They should have been dismasted, pooped by following seas, sunk in any number of ways. But by no other trick could they have made enough easting to hit the harbor mouth. Ann, thrown about by the tiller like a rat tossed by a terrier, had to surrender to Hugh's greater weight, while she baled with a bucket. Seas like twin geysers marked the harbor mouth. Then, dazed by anti-climax, they looked blankly at each other, and as though by afterthought dropped anchor.

Clouds still streamed across the heavens; seas thundered outside as in another world. But in the lee of the mighty breakwater was only a gentle swell, good anchorage, and silence.

In silence Ann baled and Hugh pumped until the immediate risk of foundering was past. It took time to adjust to the idea that they would still live.

"We could use the dinghy as a hen coop." Hugh tried to sound cheerful. "But how in future are we going ashore to steal the chickens?"

Ann was more concerned with the immediate present. "There's a crowd on shore, and it seems to be growing. I'm glad we anchored well away from the wharves. Can't see much. . . . You don't happen to have a clean dry handkerchief up your sleeve to wipe the telescope?"

"Try the hem of your slip," Hugh suggested. "Damn the pump, it's starting to choke."

The telescope was almost useless. Ann closed it with a snap. "I bet this is Alexandria, and over there is a stumpy tower which may have been the lighthouse, where the old Pharos was. I remember that from history. All I can make out about the people is that they are held up beside what looks like a large warehouse, that they're clothed, the women in dark blue or black, and the men in lighter colors. You look, I'll pump."

"The crowd is being held up by police, or soldiers," he reported. "Soldiers, I assume, by their polished shields. They look like those who tried to kill me in the Wadi Ghuzzee."

For the remainder of daylight they watched, and learned nothing more. So that next day, as soon as they had eaten their last provisions, they worked the *Nirvana* into a quayside, put out improvised fenders, made fast, and went ashore. Better to meet their fate on full stomachs than, half-starved, later.

Side by side they picked their way over massive blocks of reinforced concrete, now tilted and irregular from action of salt and sea. But the breakwater was still a noble monument to a dead civilization, to white and gold pleasure yachts of millionaires, to yet more impressive luxury liners on world cruises, to tramps, tankers and colliers, of which even the most rusty and unseaworthy was beyond the powers of present-day man to reproduce. "So much has been lost forever." Ann echoed the hunter's thought.

"Some of it is well lost," he suggested. "Civilization protected the brainy against the muscular, but did almost nothing to protect the muscular against the brainy. If you took a man's goods by force, you were always wrong. If you took them by cunning, you were protected by the law, unless you did it so outrageously that your act came under the definition of theft, fraud, or the like. I've often wondered why civilization should have frowned upon muscle, and given such privileged license to brain." He was talking against time, trying to keep Ann's thoughts from what might happen when they reached the end of the breakwater. Probably they would be killed. Almost certainly if they showed fear. If Ann had leisure to remember her last encounter, and her painful wound, she would flinch. So he talked. . . .

Another few steps, just around this next ruin of a warehouse, and he still had half of Ann's attention so they walked forward. At last they confronted a row of guards, and, behind them, a tight-packed crowd.

A buzz of excitement. Neighbor turned

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to neighbor. Arms pointed. Babies were lifted to mothers' shoulders to look. Smaller urchins stooped to peer between the barrier rail made by the outstretched spears of guards.

Ann, with a catch of relief in her voice, made the discovery. "But . . . they're *friendly!*"

TWENTY paces distant the hunter made his gesture. He slipped quiver from shoulder, raised it and bow on high for all to see; then laid them on the ground and walked forward, unarmed.

A civilized country, disciplined troops, a city, a friendly population. The long voyaging was at an end. At last ended. For the second time the hunter saw all that he had hoped for, despaired for, open like a vision before him.

The first had been when he saw the *Nirvana,* miraculously in the bay. And now —when smiling, interested dark and Arab faces grew closer, closer at each stride. Ann would be safe, as contented and well fed as those bare-armed women whose bracelets flashed as they restrained their eager children. He, once an officer in the British Army, might bear spear and shield, struggle with the new language, and slowly rise to some minor administrative post, provide a home for Ann.

Now they would show their courage by passing through the wandering sightseers, and spend their day finding a native market in the city, select strange foods, and bring back a trader to barter for something they could spare from the *Nirvana.*

Two more paces . . . Ann strode close beside him, her shoulder touching his arm for reassurance, but breathing quickly in excitement.

Now the military cordon must open. . . .

But someone barked a command.

Four broad and shining spear-heads all but pricked his skin, his and Ann's, before they could halt. The dark faces behind the shining steel showed no hate or anger, bore the impassive look of soldiers or ballet dancers who have executed an accustomed maneuver.

A man, taller than the other soldiers but without spear or shield, came quickly from a flank, and in a strange language spoke briefly to the visitors.

He spoke again, apparently in repetition, but more loudly and more slowly.

The hunter cleared his throat, spoke so that soldiers and many of the now silent crowd could hear. "We come in peace. We carry no disease. We ask food and water."

The tall officer showed intelligence, calling out to the crowd, asking no doubt if any understood. None did. Meantime the impersonal spears still menaced. A thousand people waited, for the rising ground back of the harbor was now black with spectators, thronging the narrow roads, fringing the flat roof-tops, and naked children were hanging like fruit from the trunks of wind-warped feathery date-palms.

Ann and the hunter retreated two paces, seated themselves comfortably on the warm dry stone and fought off despair.

"Egypt used to speak Arabic, didn't it? And it still may." She thought awhile. "There was a greeting used by the Shriners, a sort of Masonic group in America . . . wait a moment . . . I've got it."

She leaped light to her feet, stood before the officer, laid hand to brow, and in her clear voice addressed him. *"Salaam aleikum!"*

"Aleikum es salaam!" came the automatic response.

Now Ann faced the onlookers, took a deep breath and repeated her greeting.

Back came the many-throated response *"Aleikum es salaam."* But the spear-points scarcely wavered.

"They're quite willing to be friends," Hugh interpreted. "But they're taught to obey orders."

"Whose orders?" Ann almost snapped. "This angel with the flaming-sword business is all baloney. We want to join them, and they're quite willing to have us. . . ."

Then an incident occurred which destroyed all hope of successful defiance.

A small girl, more daring or more inquisitive than her brothers, squirmed free of the other civilians, and in doing so stumbled or was pushed beyond the military guard. At once the spears closed behind her, cutting off retreat. Dusting off her short blue skirt-cloth, she jumped up, and gave the nearest soldier the benefit of a few swift phrases. The people behind laughed, but uneasily. Then the officer took her gently, almost sadly by one thin arm, and led her to the hunter.

The officer pointed back toward the city, made signs with the flat of his hand of cutting the girl's throat, pointed toward the *Nirvana's* berth and made sign of putting food in her mouth. Then he took Hugh's hand and placed it on the girl's elaborately plaited head.

Ann laughed, and the girl, on the point of tears, looked up angrily.

"Yours, my dear Hugh, for keeps.

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Whether as slave or bride you'd better find out; though I guess the former has to be the latter too if her lord wants her."

A woman in the crowd pushed forward as though to follow her daughter, but friends restrained her.

"She broke the law, so she's outlawed. Or maybe there's some religious meaning behind keeping the native in and the foreigner out. In which case the kid's more or less tabu." Hugh patted her head consolingly. "Poor little devil!"

But it was Ann who took the first practical step. She led the young outcast as near as she might to the mother, and, with a protective arm about the child's shoulders, nodded and smiled reassurance.

The woman behind the fence of spears ceased her wails and struggles, dropped imploringly to her knees, broke into a spate of words. Ann stilled it with upraised hand.

"Ann." She pointed to herself. "Hugh." To the hunter. Then she indicated the child.

A dozen voices supplied the name. "Aishetu! Shetu!" The woman pointed to herself, "Miriamu," dragged forward a protesting man, presumably the girl's father. "Garuba." Then the officer waved Ann back, pleasantly but firmly as one who was used to giving and receiving obedience.

"Well, that's all. They won't have us." Ann summed it up. "And now let's get back. If we can't have their food, they shan't have our circus."

With parting smiles and salutations they started home. "We'll have to collect driftwood and start our condenser; then turn all hands to fish. We wanted food. Instead we've one more empty mouth to fill."

Ann looked enviously at the girl, probably no more than twelve or so, striding gravely between them. "Her mouth may be empty, but there's a breakfast bulge showing above her skirt-cloth. Lucky little brat!"

FOR lack of common language the hunter had to deduce what he could of Egypt from Shetu's actions. That the people of Alexandria were cheerful, well fed, inquisitive and of negroid stock, they had gathered from direct observation. That Shetu should hesitate and obviously muster her courage before leaping down on the *Nirvana's* deck suggested that in Egypt also ships were tabu or unknown.

"Why won't they let us in?" became the undercurrent of thought during the next two days, which turned all else in life into utter triviality. Shetu's attempt to teach her language, and to learn theirs by pointing to objects and reciting their names, served merely to bring to notice that she too was an exile. The three might be forced to leave, and start again on their interminable voyaging.

"Why won't they let us in?" detracted from the importance of an unexpected new source of food. Shetu pointed to her mouth, pinched in her stomach with both hands, pointed to the city, then blew out her stomach. "O.K." said Ann. "It's worth trying." Whatever the girl said to the cordon of guards, and whence the supply came, they never knew. But after that there appeared each morning on the quayside three basketfuls of vegetables, flat loaves of bread, fruit and even meat. And most valuable of all, three large jars of fresh water.

"Why won't they let us in?" came back with redoubled force after a short sail. They chose a day of smooth sea and light airs to leave the harbor, cruising west along the shore line, then east, but everywhere, as far as they could see, stood guards. Shetu alone enjoyed herself, pointing to sails, to rudder, asking innumerable questions, untroubled by lack of intelligible reply. Back at their moorings, Ann and the hunter held another despairing conclave.

There was an island which, from the deck, seemed uninhabited, but habitable. Could they manage to establish themselves there as Ann had at St. John's? Ann thought they could, taking advantage of calm weather for the first year to sail back to the port and beg supplies. And in the end, when the people of the mainland had become accustomed to their presence, they might be able, through Shetu, to establish contact with the civilization for which they hungered.

But there were serious doubts. Could the Alexandrines be relied upon to feed two utter strangers for a year? How could they get seeds, cuttings and tools? And above all, how shelter the *Nirvana* during storms?

In the end they had to agree that as a last resort the attempt must be made, but only as a final and quite desperate effort. "Why won't they let us in?" returned with increased urgency as they faced the thin hope of this alternative.

On the third day, as they ate their evening meal in the cabin, a voice came from the quayside above the slow creak of cordage and fenders. Shetu leaped to her feet

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and dived for the cockpit. "I've got it now," Ann exclaimed. "Shetu's prophecy or whatever it was."

It had been a bit of dumb show. Shetu, grasping something in her outstretched hand, had run round and round the small deck, pointed to the sun's course, once from east to west, once more to half its course, as though to midday. Then she had proffered an imaginary something to the hunter. Taking from him another imaginary object she had run again, in the reverse direction, pointed to the sun sinking once, and then passing again from east to west. Then she handed the object to Ann.

"A messenger, don't you see? Or relays of messengers, since Shetu passed the message from one hand to the other." Ann drew the hunter after her to the deck, where the girl was already talking with someone on the wharf. "A message to some higher official, that's you, Hugh, and then the answer returning to the junior, which she used me for, to say what is to be done with the foreigners."

The officer, the first one who had excluded them, stood solidly on the quayside, supported by two soldiers. From the neck of his tunic he drew a brass or gold locket, and pointed to it. The soldiers clashed spear on shield in salute.

"His symbol of authority," the hunter interpreted.

STOLIDLY, unmoving, he recited what were clearly orders, but utterly unintelligible. Twice, perhaps three times, he repeated them, each time a little more loudly and slowly. Each time he paused, and waited hopefully.

He spoke sharply to his escort. But discipline alone could not turn two private soldiers into interpreters. They clashed spear on shield, muttered something in deferential tones, saluted again and stood silent.

"I don't see how we're going to understand," the hunter was saying, when Ann turned to Shetu.

"You tell us."

Shetu nodded and grinned, broke into a spate of words. But her gestures gave the interpretation.

"Tonight," an excited hand pointed to the direction of sunset, "much food," a great deal of eating, patting the stomach, and lifting imaginary baskets aboard. "Tomorrow morning," indicated by pointing to sunrise, "Cast off," that was easily shown with the mooring lines so close to hand. "Sail out to the harbor and then eastward," an outflung gesture of the arm.

"I see. But supposing we don't?"

Shetu got the idea. Sucking in her small stomach, setting a doleful look upon her face, she extended her hands beggar-fashion to the quayside, drew them back empty. Then setting her jaw in determination, she made signs of walking weakly toward the shore, ending with a dramatic hand across the throat.

Ann clapped. Shetu beamed. Hugh looked troubled.

"We're to be killed if we land, and starved if we stay. What say, Ann?"

"Accept the inevitable. They can force us out, so let's take the provisions they offer and put a good face on it."

"Then let's make a gesture of it." Hugh disappeared below, returned with his bow and quiver, the former still unstrung in token of friendship. On deck he clashed bow on quiver, leaned up to the quayside, touched the officer's symbol of authority, and repeated his first salute.

The faces of officer and escort wreathed themselves in smirks of gratification. They went through an elaborate equivalent of presenting arms and, wheeling, marched almost sadly away.

"Why won't they let us in?" Ample stores had been left on the quayside under cover of darkness, and as the three formed a chain and passed the baskets aboard, as they cast off and drifted rather than sailed out to the harbor, the question seemed to grow in urgency. They had tasted the merest drop of civilization, yet that drop had increased their thirst to a fever.

"Why won't they let us in?" Guards were spaced along the shore line, widely apart, but obviously prepared to call out others to prevent unauthorized persons from landing. By force if necessary. Hugh tried a ruse, standing out to sea beyond sight of land, and at dawn on the second day coming back on his tracks. But the watchers were still there.

"I'm out of my depth, like an Australian aborigine in Piccadilly." The hunter, with fingers and teeth, was renewing the delicate lashing of an arrowhead which salt air had loosened, while Ann blew on her small charcoal cooking fire, in a pottery brazier, the gift of some unknown Alexandrine.

"It's a feeling of helplessness. I've got it too." She tossed back a lock of her hair. "Civilization is so damned impersonal, so like fate itself. It doesn't hate, it doesn't love. Egypt just happens to have a rule

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against allowing strangers to enter, and the fact that the Egyptians liked us and had nothing against us didn't matter. I *hate* civilization!" She jabbed another piece of charcoal into the embers.

The hunter half raised himself to glance out of the porthole. They were safely distant from the shore, and Shetu steered a good course except for the times when she put over the tiller to watch the compass swing. She was amusing to watch, beckoning to the wind when it showed signs of lessening, kicking her heels in triumph when by changing tack she forced the same wind to drive the *Nirvana* in a different direction. A small girl who had probably never driven anything larger than a donkey was performing what must seem to her a miracle.

Her course, and the set of her sails received minute attention, but she cajoled, teased and threatened the wind as a mahout's son might bully a bored and philosophic elephant. It was all but impossible to get her down to meals.

"We may get another chance. Is there anything we can learn, any mistake we can correct? I've been wondering about more clothes. It didn't occur to me at the time, but we've lots of rotten canvas, a few cushion covers. . . ."

"No! You can wear more clothes, but I won't." Ann was emphatic. "They'll accept us for the barbarians that we are, or not accept us at all. Oh, I know it sounds mad to neglect anything, however small, that might give us a chance. But we've got to preserve our identities at all costs. We've lost our friends, our countries, our ways of life, our backgrounds. The only thing left for us is ourselves. We're barbarians, the New Barbarians, and we must keep our tribal customs. Don't you see?"

He didn't. Not that it mattered. For a plan was slowly forming in his mind. Ann and Shetu would be better without him. Some distant part of Egypt, out of touch with the Alexandrines, would accept the small Shetu and an inoffensive woman even though a stranger.

HIS back against the low roof of the cabin, his feet braced against the gunwale, he rested the telescope against his knee, and examined the distant shore, hazy and blue in the heat. There would be date palms, no doubt, and groves of fig trees, as there had been near Alexandria; but from this distance even the low-lying shore line was indistinct. He signed to Shetu to steer a more southerly course. It was late afternoon, and he wished to be close inshore before he told Ann of his intention. With this faint breeze he did not want hours of argument, perhaps hours of wrestling for the helm, before he could release himself. Besides, the farther inland he could reach before dawn, discovery and pursuit began, the less likelihood of his depredations being blamed on the *Nirvana's* remaining crew.

Shetu had duly changed course, but now was trying to catch his attention. Something her sharp eyes had noted ahead, something which, from her slow flapping of arms, was a large bird. Well, she could see plenty more.

For another hour the shore line would be too indistinct for him to mark down a landing, or note whether a village stood across his path. But the telescope gave him excuse for silence. And he needed to sort his ideas, to weigh up his opponents.

The soldiers he had seen were spearmen, though doubtless there were also companies of archers. They were solidly built, therefore slow afoot, and being so well disciplined would be certain to cling to their encumbering shields when in pursuit. Even the archers would suffer from the defects of a standing army, maneuvering noisily to shouts of command, keeping a fixed distance apart when in open order, irrespective of whether they were beating thick cover or marching over open plainland. It should be easy to slip between them, or by superior speed to turn their flank. . . .

Shetu was waving wildly, pointing now to the north, now to the east. A number of birds, doubtless, were slowly winging their way back to land before nightfall.

"Galleys!" Ann's startled voice brought Hugh to his feet.

Galleys? What did she mean?

Shetu's birds! Not birds at all, but . . . ships! Ships with wet oars flashing in the low sun. Ann was right, galleys. Sea rovers of some kind.

Ann had seized the glass, impatient. "Each with twenty or thirty long oars, perhaps more," she reported in jerky excited tones. "Not in banks, like the classical biremes and triremes, but low on the water like the old Danish long-boats. They seem to be pointed toward us, all of them."

That was clear, even to the naked eye. And the breeze so light that there was no hope of outsailing them, or breaking through their line. Nor was it just a line of ships, but a fleet, converging like the

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sticks of a fan, more and more coming into view in line ahead behind the leaders. Trapped!

ROLLING slightly, without even steerage way, they must wait. And slowly, but inevitably, the disciplined enemy was closing in. The tempting shore line still a mile or more away. If only the breeze had not dropped so early, they would have stood a chance. They could have beached the *Nirvana,* left her to the mercy of the pirates, and headed inland. Some village would surely give Ann and Shetu shelter, thought Hugh, and if they no longer had anywhere to go, would permit them to remain. Damn the wind!

Then hope rose, if only slightly. The early dropping of the onshore wind would mean, must mean, an offshore evening breeze stronger than usual.

Shetu, unaware of danger, or thrilled by the adventure, had abandoned the useless helm, was pointing to the encircling ships, chattering brightly. Poor little devil, in her peaceful home, protected by soldiers against all danger, she had no thought of death, torture, or, at the best, slavery.

But who were these pirates? Whence did they come? Not from North Africa, for they had no ships. Not from Europe, for no disciplined fleet like this could have sprung into being since he had roamed the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Through the Suez, perhaps from the Persian Gulf? Too long a way, without food or water for so many men.

Hot sweltering breathlessness. Then came the faintest puff of air from the south. A long wait ensued, sweat running down Hugh's armpits, as he came up from below with bow and quiver. Shetu, noting the weapons, looked troubled, made dumb show of ships traveling from south to north and back again many times. She made other signs which neither Hugh nor Ann could interpret.

Another faintest of puffs, a pause, then followed a continuous but fluctuating current of cooling breeze.

"Go before it, or tack for the shore?" Ann demanded.

"Shoreward. Slower, but we can't break through them, they're too close." Besides, he ruminated, that would give the galleys farther to row, and by then there would be more breeze, making the *Nirvana* more maneuverable.

Sluggishly, as in a leaden-footed nightmare, they got under way. The faintest ripple came from their barnacled waterline, scraping through the treacly blue sea. By now the telescope was pointless. With the naked eye Hugh could count the men, three at each long oar, an equal number of round shields slung, Norse-fashion, along the gunwale. No overseers with whips were pacing the raised runway, so the rowers were soldiers, freemen, not slaves. That meant more fighting men, more than a thousand, perhaps two thousand if the distant boats were as heavily manned. A few officers, as he judged them to be, in the raised prows, dressed simply, as was the one at Alexandria, more like civilians to the eye.

The nearest boats were a quarter of a mile away and making a good three yards to the *Nirvana's* one. The men were singing. The hunter wished that he could feel so cheerful. Shetu in childish treble was singing the same song. Where could she have picked it up?

It was now only two hundred yards to the nearest boat. Ann changed course to sheer away from it. Hope faded instant by instant.

They were within good bowshot now. The hunter drew arrow from quiver, thrust it back again. The odds were too heavy, and resistance would only seal the fate of Ann and Shetu.

Now the rowers had ceased their song, and at word of command the stroke increased. Scarce a hundred yards now separated the *Nirvana* from the impassive face of the commanding officer of the nearest boat. The whole world seemed tensely silent, but for the creak and rattle of oars, and Shetu's piping voice still singing in rhythm to the flashing straining sweeps.

Dodging one boat, Ann brought another closer, on the other side. Now the two boats were abreast. They heard a word of command and grappling hooks appeared. The *Nirvana* was prisoner. Ann dropped sail, flung her arms about the hunter, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIII

EVEN as Hugh cursed himself for surrendering, he realized why resistance was beyond his power. Not force of arms, but a moral force defeated him without test by battle. For these people were civilized and he only a half-clad savage. Behind them, supporting them, lay duty to their country, to their people, to their commander; and he owed no duty, and had only the expediency of an individual to consider. Only the man who fights for

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others will fight when death is certain.

Another command. Hugh stiffened his knees to meet the expected downstroke of flashing spear-heads. Thus he might hasten his death and give a last chance to Ann and Shetu. If only wounded, instinct would lead him to draw knife and fight.

But the spear-points rose unbloodied, spear-butts dropped to deck with a single thump. And the hunter staggered forward a pace, unbalanced by the blow which had not fallen.

They were to be taken prisoner, then, perhaps enslaved? Yes, that was it. A short stocky man, dark-skinned almost as the rank and file, and with a deep sword or axe-dent in his bare shaven skull, rose from a low stool on the small fore-deck of a galley, and signed to them to go aboard. An intelligent-looking man, dressed in a sleeveless white robe of coarse cotton homespun. As mild in appearance as simple in dress, yet he had the air of command. Hugh, giving Ann a conventional hand down the slippery oars, grasped at the first faint encouragement.

"He's a decent-looking old bird, the pirate-chief or admiral."

"If only we knew his language, and could make him understand!"

The commander spoke. Repeated the words. Hugh shook his head. Then, remembering how effective the action had been in Alexandria, he saluted with bow and quiver, touched the man's chain of authority, and saluted again.

The commander smiled courteously, and touched his chain in acknowledgement. Raised a gentle hand in signal for the boarding parties to leap back into place. With a click the spears and shields were shipped along the gunwales. Another signal, and the galley leaped forward to the thrust of well-timed oars.

Now would come manacles or cords, Hugh thought, and cowardly little orderlies to hustle off the two defenseless prisoners with blows and insults. But no one even offered to disarm him of arrows and long stabbing knife. Instead two upturned baskets were set opposite the commander's carved stool, and signs were made that he and Ann should sit.

"Well!" Ann breathed her surprise.

With remarkable sense the Admiral attempted no further questions, but studied them attentively, giving obvious concentration to their faces, their hands, their feet. Then receiving from an attendant a roll of what seemed papyrus, he wrote, or painted, with a reed pen.

A month later they were to see the official report.

"The ship is such as you have long required. Unseaworthy but well suited to serve as model for measurements. The man and woman show no fear, behave with reason and with courtesy. Therefore I take it upon myself to preserve them too, for they seem of value. They are Northern in bone, in skin, in hair, in eyes and in expression. He bears as many scars as a pariah dog, but except for a little lameness would make an excellent warrior; not of the line, but better as a commander of bowmen. He has a tuft of cotton on his bowstring which he should be asked to explain when he knows our speech.

"It is clear that they have not been together many months and that they come from different modes of life. Her hands are, for a woman, more developed than are his, for a man. His feet and legs show that he has traveled far and fast, though his back and head show that he has carried no burdens. Her legs are those of a house woman, or at the most of a tiller of the ground. Though not recently, by her hands, has she tilled."

It must have been at this point that Ann made her discovery.

"Look, Hugh! Ahead of us. . . ." She pointed excitedly to the coastline. "They're taking us into a river mouth or something. Supposing it's the Nile!"

"And Shetu knew their song! So. . . ."

Ann leaped to the conclusion. "So they're Egyptians, not pirates after all. The Egyptian navy coming back from a raid, from policing the near-by waters, or even from maneuvers."

Hugh was still puzzled. "We were thrown out of Alexandria. . . ."

"Not just thrown out, but provisioned and told to go east. We went east, and. . . ."

The Admiral continued to write. "Both speak the same language, and though they speak fast are able to understand each other. Owing to the difference of the male and female voice I am unable to say whether they come from the same village."

FOOD was brought together with a heavy wine, and water to mix with it. Dried figs, parched unleavened barley chupatties, and something which was perhaps powdered fish made into a paste with olive oil.

The report continued. "Our food is strange to them, except the figs from Cyprus. It should be noted that they eat in an unusual manner, even with their left hands; but as civilized people should,

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they made signs of thanks to me before eating. Though both are clad in only a few rags, and though he bears all signs of being one of the animal-men whom we slay whenever we encounter them, yet I repeat that, if such be your will, they should be preserved.

"Their ship can be kept guarded and untouched until they have learned our language and can explain all its parts. Then it should be placed in the hands of our shipwrights that more may be made of its kind, and men instructed in its use. It has two shark-fin sails and. . . ."

"See the smokes going up?. We're recognized from the shore and I'll bet those are beacon fires."

"To show us in." The hunter combined a honey-sweet fig with a large mouthful of chupattie. "I haven't seen either compass or sextant aboard, though they may be stowed away somewhere. Perhaps they go by the seasonal direction of winds and a good eye for the sun until they make landfall; then creep along the coast till they hit their destination."

"It may be due to food and drink, but I'm feeling that we've landed on both feet. And. . . . Say! I've a bright idea."

Ann poured a little water over her fingers to remove the fig-sugar, and made signs of writing. The Admiral dipped reed-pen in ink, and courteously handed over his roll of tissue-like paper; and she added a few words to the official report. "That will help to show that we're civilized, even educated. Though I don't suppose they'll find anyone to read it."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing bright, only: 'I am Ann Shillito of Chicago, Illinois. With me is Hugh Fitzharding, graduate of Cambridge University and once an officer in His Britannic Majesty's Army."

The report continued. "The writing is by the woman, at her request.

"Now as to the strange ship, it is being brought in under tow of three galleys, and should be safely within the River of Egypt before dark.

"As to the girl of our country who was with them, I will report further concerning her when I have spoken with her. It was clear that she was well treated and happy, for she showed no desire to escape to our galleys, but called 'Good fortune!' after the two prisoners.

"This letter will go forward by village-to-village runners, together with my report on the progress of your colony in Cyprus, and on the success of our voyage."

The dusk of evening began to fall as they swept steadily up the brown waters of the palm-fringed and village-studded delta. A shallow broad river, moving sluggishly between low banks. Along the near shore every few hundred yards a wooden water-wheel creaked reluctantly round, turned by a somnolent water-buffalo; or a series of bucket lifts on counterbalanced poles were dipped and raised by chanting almost-naked men.

"I . . . I don't know what to say, or even what to think." Ann drew her basket nearer to Hugh. "And I'm beginning to believe something that I'm afraid to believe, in case it shouldn't be true. Let's just watch, and hope!"

When the galley drew in to a bank below a thatched and mud-walled village, women and children trooped down with water-pots and baskets of fresh food balanced on their heads, gave drink to the thirsty rowers and exchanged jests. Men came hurrying, wet-legged from the irrigation ditches, brushing rich black soil from their hands as they ran, dropping finger-tips to ground in greeting to the commander. To one of these the papyrus scroll was handed. Then on again, with pulsing strokes of the oars, into the growing darkness.

"A fertile land full of hard-working and friendly people." Ann's voice broke with emotion. "Oh Hugh, they've *got* to take us in! On any terms! I could teach them something. And you. . . . "

"Killing. That's my only trade. And my professional qualifications impress them so lightly that they haven't troubled to disarm me." He strolled forward, and laid bow and quiver under the protection of a narrow shelf where the night dew would not affect them. Returning, he laid a hand on Ann's knee. "I'm sorry, Ann. That was a peevish remark. Of course I'll do anything that I can. But. . . ."

But what could he? What did they use prisoners for in this land of Egypt? Not as galley-slaves, obviously, and for that he was thankful. But naturally on some work too toilsome or dangerous for free citizens. In the mines perhaps, if they had them. Or in quarries. Far preferable would be plain straightforward execution to grace the celebration of the fleet's return. But that would be too merciful to suit the taste of the ruler of a barbaric empire. This was no longer a Westernized Egypt, and ancient Asia Minor and the Near East had scarcely been noted for mercy. The Assyrians had been the most cruel, but paint-

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ings in Egyptian tombs showed that they too had done their sadistic worst to captured foreigners. Poor Ann, dreaming her hopeful visions—he had no heart to disillusion her.

If Ann were lucky, some man would take her into his household. That might mean only a toilsome life at the quern, grinding corn. At the best, she might slide into domestic servitude. But was she young enough, this woman, gracefully slender, yet alluring in her rich womanhood? To him. . . . He felt a sudden surge of anger. . . . But to some jaded silken ruler, how attractive would she be?

Ought he to give some warning of what so obviously lay ahead of them? Or leave Ann to enjoy her last hours of liberty? Poor Ann!

"Poor Hugh!" Her remark startled him. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. That we're feeble little flies getting deeper and deeper into the spider-web. And all of a sudden we'll be caught and killed."

If only that were all!

"But can't you see, Hugh?" Her voice rose slightly in impatience with his denseness. "These people aren't like what you think at all. You've only to look at them to see."

He felt her hand seek his in the darkness. Hope? Yes, that was the trouble; no longer did he dare to hope. Only the miracle of a ship on the deserted seas had rekindled hope when first he had seen the *Nirvana*. Only sheer necessity had blown it to a tiny spark when they had tried to go ashore at Alexandria. Good fortune must now be an accomplished fact before he could accept it; no longer had he power to anticipate safety, happiness, a life of usefulness, a life with Ann.

The jerk . . . glide . . . jerk . . glide of the boat to the thrust of many oars nodded his head as though from drowsiness, and seemed by its mechanical action to induce sleep. Mosquitoes in pinging and pricking myriads stirred him to ineffectual slappings. Lulled by the oars, roused by the bites, he hovered between sleep and wakefulness.

AT LAST Hugh was wakened from a doze to find Ann sleeping across his knees. The ship had stopped, and that had roused him. A voice hailed from the dark bank, then torches and another village sprang into view. For the first time since the galley had touched at the delta mouth it drew in to the shore. Dusty and breathless a runner dropped to a knee, handed a sealed scroll to the commander. A glance at the seal, and the latter touched his chain, while he and those about him stooped and put hand to deck in deep obeisance.

Vaguely Hugh realized that Ann and he passed through a lane of villagers, and that they were ushered into a low mud hut about which still clung the dust of hasty sweeping. Food, water, cotton coverlets, and a basket-work bed of still green and damp palm-leaf midriffs were supplied them, and the door-curtain was dropped behind their departing escort. The torchlight removed, they noticed the faint glimmer of a wick dipped in a three-corner saucer of red earthenware, set in a niche beside the bed.

By now they were wide awake. Ann stood for a moment listening. "They're going away. Leaving us unguarded!"

She lifted the curtain, and went out into the night. Returning she announced, "We're right on the outskirts of the village, in an irrigated garden. You can see palm-trees against the stars, and smell lime or orange; we're in a grove of whichever of the two it is which has thorns. Oh, it's lovely!"

Destructive Europe, then barren seas, then this, a small oasis of fertility built by man's muscles. A thin moon, which Ann had overlooked, outlined in feathered tracery the slowly swaying palm-fronds. They heard the occasional chirp of a bird settling back to rest after the tactless irruption of people and torches. Frogs made pompous noises from the ditches.

This was the fulfillment of man's function here on earth, to create something out of nothing. To grow things, to build a simple hut like this with his own hands, digging the clay from the ground and mixing it with the straw which he had grown and the dung of the animals he had bred, roofing it with the midriffs of his own palm trees, thatching it with the leaves of the fronds. Here a man need be neither parasite nor destroyer. He could raise a family, and be a useful member of society almost to his death. Dare he give way, and begin to hope?

"Let me inform you that this is home," Ann said. "I don't know how I know, but I know. Call it a hunch and laugh; but wait and see!"

"You attractive little devil! I suppose if I gave in to temptation and took you in my arms there'd be a clap of thunder, and a smell of brimstone, and you'd be gone. The second temptation is to believe, as you

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say, that this, or some place like it, could be ours."

"Save time, and fall for both at once." She edged a little closer, rested her head serenely on his shoulder. "You're going to get both. According to my prophecy I go with the hut and garden. Maybe I'd come in useful in one way or another."

"I'm only now daring to dream that we've got a chance." Hugh's voice shook. "I daren't, Ann, daren't include you in the dream. That would be building too big a target. Fate would just bomb us and our hopes off the face of the earth. You know, Ann, I've always wanted you to be my wife. No one could have been as close to you as I have been, known every quirk of your amusing mind, have come to depend on your courage and endurance as I have, without. . . ."

She leaned over and kissed him. "And all the time I've constituted myself your particular private plague, Hugh dear. But now that you've admitted this obsession that you have for a penniless adventuress you met on a Mediterranean cruise, why . . . I'll have to spend the rest of my life curing you."

The door curtain moved, was thrust to one side by a long white face framed between beard and horns. In came a goat, laid its mournful head with baleful yellow eyes on the edge of the couch, and sighed.

Ann suddenly laughed. "The ch . . . ch . . . chaperon!"

The wick slipped in the little bowl, and the light died.

The goat subsided on the floor with a bored sigh.

Peace for a while, then an eerier sound, half wheeze, half whistle, strangely alarming.

Ann was the first to identify its source. "Our chaperon, our first chaperon of civilization, snores. . . ."

Laughing, Hugh picked up one of the coverlets from the bed, and kissing Ann, went out to find himself a bed nearby under the warm Egyptian stars.

THE SUN was high, the air already growing drowsy with heat, when Ann pushed open the curtain, and said good morning to a friendly world. A scaffolded platform built out over the Nile for a counterbalanced irrigation bucket made an effective diving-board. Ann cut the placid water with scarcely a splash. A few minutes later Hugh followed her.

"I don't care . . . " Ann spat water from the corner of her mouth and headed out into the stream. "I don't care if it does sound mad, but our luck's turned at last! Lots of things are going to happen, and all of them are nice."

With breakfast came new clothes. Hugh's a simple white robe, like the commander's, though even more tattered at the knee, but, like Ann's skirt cloth of faded blue, newly laundered.

"I've studied the latest fashion." She pirouetted, arms and shoulders bare, knees just covered. "How does the hem hang at the bottom?"

Hugh caught her mood. "A very becoming creation, Modom. It accentuates the pervenche blue of Modom's eyes."

The large breakfast, mainly of fruits, added contentment, which was not mere satiety, to their earlier exhilaration.

"I want to start housekeeping, but there aren't any dishes to wash, unless you count the brass drinking bowls and the woven grass platters." Ann swung to her feet and smoothed down her new dress cloth. "So let's stroll through the village and find someone to show me how to do my hair."

The feeling of optimism was utterly unfounded, as Hugh kept telling himself. Nothing objective had changed since last night; the change was in himself, subjective. Yet the attitude of the people encouraged the mad belief in Ann's prophecy.

Aged crones looked up from sifting flour to grin toothlessly as the two passed. Younger women, whisk-broom in hand, called greetings from doorways. An old man warming his mummylike body on a sitting-stone against a sunny wall raised his stick spear-fashion in salute. Children trailed them fearlessly from the village out to the water-lift from which they had dived before breakfast.

It was just Ann's optimism infecting him, her belief that good luck was on its way. Quite impossible of course.

They were expected. The crowd opened for them, made signs for them to go forward. On the deck of the *Nirvana* stood the Admiral, with him a tall thin man in a white robe more tattered even than Hugh's, and a small girl. . . .

"It's Shetu!" Ann recognized her. "That means she's sharing our luck. Oh, I'm so glad.

Hugh was staring, staring at the tall thin stranger, if he were a stranger. . . .

Now, impelled by the expectation of the crowd, he and Ann had swung up on deck. The tall ragged stranger moved toward them. He spoke.

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"I object to being forced to believe the fantastically impossible." He stared at Hugh. "You died at Tel el Jemmi. So why are you alive and in Egypt?"

Gravely, but with a lurking smile, he extended a hand. Hugh shook it. The crowd gaped.

"But you . . . ?"

"I drew off the attack to Beersheba. Some died of thirst, and I killed a few. They caught me as I slept, and took me back to Egypt, uncertain each day whether to carry me over another march, or report that the prisoner had died of wounds."

No one else could have been so chattily inconsequent. None but the dandy dressed in nothing but a loincloth, armed with no more than a spear, living as a vegetarian, interested to all appearances in nothing but Byzantine architecture and philosophy, yet he had managed in those days to keep a whole city free from cunning ever-hungry foes. But what was he now? A wandering preacher? And what was he doing on the *Nirvana?*

"I made myself a bet each time the sun rose, and lost twenty-seven piastres to myself through guessing wrong more often than right. One pays for being a pessimist. I've been the poorest man in Egypt ever since, sometimes in debt twenty-seven piastres, sometimes an anxious little capitalist who is owed all that he possesses and sees no way to collect the debt. Perhaps you could advise me. . . ." He turned to Ann.

"I . . . oh, I'm sure I couldn't." The thin man was confusing and she obviously paused to take a grip of realities. "If you mean that you're hungry, couldn't you join us here, where the villagers are kind enough to give us food and even clothes? Hugh told me of you. You're the Oxonian of Stamboul. Though I still don't understand. . . ."

"An explanation is due. I happened to hear from one of my jailers in Cairo that my interrogation and subsequent execution was being regrettably delayed because the Cadis, the religious judges you know, were engaged in philosophical discussion. He was frightfully apologetic, the poor old turnkey, and kept trying to explain that the fault did not lie in his department.

"To take his mind off his professional troubles I interested him in the Cadis' puzzle. It was just one of the many versions of which came first, the hen or the egg, but sounded more imposing because it dealt in Three Attributes to Allah. Of course you don't know these people and their love for abstract argument, Miss Shillito, so you'll hardly appreciate. . . ."

"But how do you know my name?"

"My old friend Abubakr here," he indicated the commander of the fleet, "sent me your note on this report. A grand guy, as you'd say, though he takes himself and his duties a shade seriously and won't talk about anything but ships, crews and stores. Wait till you've picked up some of the language; he'll pump you for sixteen hours a day on everything from the tides in the straits of Gibraltar to the use of the sextant. Which reminds me. Care to come with me on my rounds? I'm a sort of stock inspector and representative of a non-existent Ministry of Agriculture."

He turned inconsequently to speak to the commander, leaped on shore, and waved to Ann and Hugh to follow.

"A good man, Abubakr, but a little trying. Six months ago he said good-bye with a grouse about some badly spun cordage. And his second remark on meeting me again was to complain about a sack of corn. One sack in God knows how many hundred. And he seems to think it was my fault."

"Then you're something to do with official supplies?" Ann, who did not know him, was trying to grab a fact out of the whirl of words.

"Yes. Something like that."

AS HE passed through the village he had exchanged greetings, people dropping hand to earth in salutation; had turned back a girl's eyelid and given brief instructions to her mother; picked up a terrified kitten from before the menacing feet of many people and set it on a roof; all without apparent break in his stride. Now, in the open fields his stride increased and his words came even faster and more strangely.

"Remind me, Fitzharding, to tell you about these Three Attributes of Allah some day when we've got time. But Miss Shillito would be bored, as women are so practical. The upshot was that the jailers, we the prisoners, and a few friends from outside took up the problem of our religious superiors. For two weeks we did nothing else, and managed to produce some really interesting subtleties. Then I was sent for by the Cadis, not to stand my trial, but because it had leaked out that I was making headway on the problem of whether God exists because he is God, or whether God is God because he exists.

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"For six months I did a Scheherazade act with the puzzle, then reminded them that I was a prisoner. Regretfully they took five minutes to constitute themselves a court and hastily pardon my crimes and absolve my sins. They pointed out most sternly that I had jeopardized the chance of arriving at a decision on the puzzle by so carelessly allowing myself to remain in prison where some ignorant judge of a lower court might have caused me to be decapitated. I promised to leave prison. And here I am."

Hugh knew better than to interrupt. The more the man talked, the more hope there was of discovering what lay back of the strange story.

"What about the . . . what d' you call it . . . the hen and the egg?" Ann was still trying to understand.

"The discussion around and about the Three Attributes? It still goes on. When a religious leader grows too fanatic and begins to threaten trouble I appoint him to my Select Committee for Solving the Insoluble." He turned to Hugh. "It's as convenient as the House of Lords, you know; only my people put in a ten-hour day, and don't get off for the grouse and the salmon."

The man's rags utterly discredited it . . . but still. . . . Hugh took the plunge. "Then you're Sultan, Pharaoh, or whatever it is?"

"How dreadfully Cambridge! My interesting history all reduced to a conventional success story—'From Prison to Palace.' But I escaped from the palace too. I'm the poorest man in the land. Anyone who apes my penury is hailed before the judges on charges of treason."

Of course the Oxonian was mad by all common standards. But if the usual standards and values should happen occasionally to be false? Then this beggar king was sane beyond all normal sanity. Hugh wondered which it could be. Meantime one feeling was clear, that just as he had thrown in his lot with the Oxonian in the desperate attempt to reach Egypt, so, now that they were actually in Egypt, would he again offer his services. He had no need to make the offer.

"So glad. There's so much to be done that the sooner you know how we live in Egypt the better. Abubakr has asked for you both, but I told him you couldn't be spared for more than a month a year, so he'd better not bother you until he's got a few experimental *Nirvanas* built. Might make a pleasant holiday for you, this trip to his shipyards in North Palestine or the Island. We've got nothing in the way of timber in Egypt.

"By the way, where would you like to live? You are both accepted as people of importance, so you will have to be content with little above bare physical comforts." A few questions in Hausa, and replies, as they passed through another field. "The Village Headman asks if you like the hut you were given. If so, it's yours, with vegetables and fruits according to season, and an occasional chicken or goat. It would be nice of you to accept, as he's a good man, and isn't likely to get another such chance for 'meritorious gift' as they call it, in his liftime."

Ann tried to reply, "I—I—" She caught Hugh's arm. "You try to thank the Headman."

But the Headman was already beaming.

"Good. So that's settled." The Oxonian caught sight of Ann's wearied step, glanced at Hugh whose face and legs were powdered with dust, seared with runnels of sweat. "I'd forgotten that you're not tempered to the humid heat of the Nile Valley. Go back and rest. I'll come to you at sundown."

ALONE and in the dusk a weary ruler came slowly toward them, dropped stiffly beside them, leaned his back against the wall of their hut.

For the first time Hugh noted, with shock, how the Oxonian had changed. Lines of fatigue, and perhaps of fasting, seamed his face. Lightly muscled even in the old days, he was now gaunt. His voice, toneless with weariness, was no more than a whisper. Poor devil—it must be hard to be a king.

"The great men of our land must rid themselves of riches, or none will esteem them great. Bribery, extortion, even theft, unless of the simplest necessities, will bring shame and humiliation upon the man who shows himself enriched, even though the crime itself is hidden. Charitable gifts have ever been encouraged by Islam, but yearly it becomes more difficult to find one who will accept such gifts, lest they enrich and shame him. So public services benefit, knowing neither the honor of poverty, nor the shame of wealth. Schools and colleges will flourish under their endowments, and processes will be discovered and rediscovered in everything from mathematics to pottery, agriculture to astronomy."

Gone was all trace of whimsy and quaintness of speech. Here was a man revealing his innermost aims to—Hugh

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caught at the warming thought—friends.

"One principle rules us; blatantly borrowed from Christianity, from Islam, or from Buddhism, if you will; contempt for useless possessions. Our waste of man-power is less than in any country known to history. Gifts to public charities, including all the departments of government, have allowed us gradually to wipe out taxation with its wasteful overhead of tax assessment, tax collections, tax laws, and tax prosecutions. Minor officials like your Village Head here work for the honor, just as they did in West Africa, just as our magistrates did in England. Whole-time officials most naturally claim the right to the pomp of poverty, and cost little beyond the charitable gift of a man's labor for perhaps a day a week for each of their little gardens.

"Once the virtue of simplicity is wholeheartedly accepted, think how many crimes become rare, if not impossible. There's so little to steal, and so little motive for theft, for murder, for fraud, and more than half the other more common crimes on the court calendar. Perhaps yet more valuable is our saving of the man-power usually wasted in police, prisoners, judges, witnesses and even narks. Nobody likes to be hindered and badgered about, and we can dispense with lots of the old-fashioned laws and regulations and licenses and permits. We're on our way to being a moderately free people, for the first time in civilized history."

Ann ventured a criticism, quiet-voiced as one reluctant to wake either herself or others to reality. "Doesn't it make life rather empty?"

"Once I was afraid it might. But I had forgotten how human humans are. Man is still a competitive animal.

"Having more time to spare, he now needs wider realms of competition than of old when the scramble for wealth diverted his energies, whether he liked it or not. But have you heard the people sing? Have you noticed their flowers, their weaving, pottery, carving, brass-and-iron work? You will, you're too good an auditor and spectator for them to waste. At each full moon, which allows people from outlying farms to find their way to the nearest village, the whole country dances on its threshing floors, men and women of all ages, down to the smallest toddling child. They send teams to each other's villages, teams of drummers, musicians and dancers."

The gentle murmur ceased; and it was as though a cool breeze no longer brought its comforts to fevered skin. Hugh slapped at a mosquito, shifted his hams on the hard ground, his shoulders against the scratchy wall. Darkness covered the visionary, and it was as if his vision too was blotted out. If Hugh Fitzharding could do anything to preserve it, even to giving his life, he must do it. Not for any sentimental reason, but because here was work for a man, for a superman. If no superman could be found, he and Ann, working as one, could at least. . . .

"Why do you sound so sad? You have done so much, so incredibly much." Ann's voice trembled with sympathy.

"Because there is so much that I cannot do. What I have done, others have done; Asoka, possibly Gautama, among the princes; a legion of religious leaders for their own immediate followers; Knights Templars and Knights Hospitallers for those of their orders. Economically Egypt was ready for it, and the people were receptive. What I have done is less than what thousands have done before me; and their work died with them as mine will, unless. . . ."

A shuffling sound as the beggar king swung to his feet and stood in vague outline against the stars.

"Here is a garden fertile and peaceful; here a life for the two of you as husband and wife, tranquil and sweet. Relax from the hard contest of life, rest from your toil; you have earned the rest. Let me say, as it were, Benedicite, my children!"

"We can't . . . Both Hugh and Ann rose in protest.

Surely the beggar ruler laughed? It sounded like it.

"Oh, dear!" There was still a smile in his voice. "Must we be reasonable, still? And spoil my exit line which I've been working up to for the last five minutes?"

"We couldn't stay here while you. . . ." Ann continued to protest.

"Of course you couldn't. You've been so long without sugar that you've both an aching sugar hunger for the sweets of life. But you probably haven't the slightest sugar digestion. So as soon as the taste of acid begins to ruin the flavor of life, send word to me, and I'll tell you where to meet me. . . .

"Then we'll set out, the three of us, to reform the world, called to our grand vocation by lack of good sugar digestion. Too bad." They distinctly heard a chuckle. "Because it's so hard on other people."

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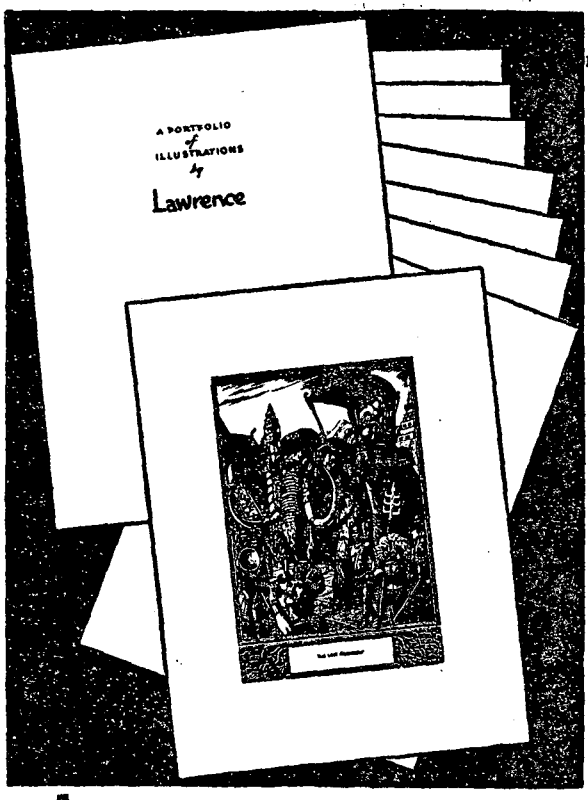

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Margaret Delandre was dead, but her hate was a living thing that followed inexorably the every footstep of her murderer.

THE SECRET OF THE GROWING GOLD

By

Bram Stoker

WHEN Margaret Delandre went to live at Brent's Rock the whole neighborhood awoke to the pleasure of an entirely new topic for gossip. Whispered rumors in connection with either the Delandre family or the Brents of Brent's Rock, were not few; and if the secret history of the county had been written in full both names would have been found well represented. It is true that the status of each was so different that they might have belonged to different continents—or to different worlds—for hitherto their orbits had never crossed. The Brents were accorded by the whole section of the country an unique social dominance, and had ever held themselves as high above the yeoman class to which Margaret Delandre belonged, as a blue-blooded Spanish hidalgo out-tops his peasant tenantry.

The Delandres had an ancient record and were proud of it in their way as the Brents were of theirs. But the family had never risen above yeomanry; and although they had been once well-to-do in the good old times of foreign wars and protection, their fortunes had withered under the scorching of the free trade sun and the "piping times of peace." They had, as the elder members used to assert, "stuck to the land," with the result that they had taken root in it, body and soul. In fact, they, having chosen the life of vegetables, had flourished as vegetation does—blossomed and thrived in the good season and suffered in the bad. Their holding, Dander's Croft, seemed to have been worked out, and to be typical of the family itself.

The latter had declined generation after generation, sending out now and again some abortive shoot of unsatisfied energy in the shape of a soldier or sailor, who had worked his way to the minor grades of the services and had there stopped, cut short either from unheeding gallantry in action or from that destroying cause to men without breeding or youthful care—the recognition of a position above them which they feel unfitted to fill.

So, little by little, the family dropped lower and lower, the men brooding and dissatisfied, and drinking themselves into the grave, the women drudging at home, or marrying beneath them. In process of time all disappeared, leaving only two in the Croft, Wykham Delandre and his sister Margaret. The man and woman seemed to have inherited in masculine and feminine form respectively the evil tendency of their race, sharing in common the principles, though manifesting them in different ways, of sullen passion, voluptuousness and recklessness.

The history of the Brents had been something similar, but showing the causes of decadence in their aristocratic and not their plebeian forms. They, too, had sent their shoots to the wars; but their positions had been different, and they had often attained honor—for without flaw they were gallant, and brave deeds were done by them before the selfish dissipation which marked them had sapped their vigor.

The present head of the family—if family it could now be called when one re-

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His heart grew colder and colder, as he sat with eyes full of terror, watching his doom.

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mained of the direct line—was Geoffrey Brent. He was almost a type of wornout race, manifesting in some ways its most brilliant qualities, and in others its utter degradation. He might be fairly compared with some of those antique Italian nobles whom the painters have preserved to us with their courage, their unscrupulousness, their refinement of cruelty. He was certainly handsome, with that dark, aquiline, commanding beauty which women so generally recognize as dominant. With men he was distant and cold; but such a bearing never deters womankind. Even a timid woman is not afraid of a fierce and haughty man.

And so it was that there was hardly a woman of any kind or degree, who lived within view of Brent's Rock, who did not cherish some form of secret admiration for the handsome wastrel. The category was a wide one, for Brent's Rock rose up steeply from the midst of a level region and for a circuit of a hundred miles it lay on the horizon, with its high old towers and steep roofs cutting the level edge of wood and hamlet, and far-scattered mansions.

SO LONG as Geoffrey Brent confined his dissipations to London and Paris and Vienna—anywhere out of sight and sound of his home—opinion was silent. It is easy to listen to far off echoes unmoved, and we can treat them with disbelief, or scorn, or disdain, or whatever attitude of coldness may suit our purpose. But when the scandal came close home it was another matter; and the feelings of independence and integrity which is in people of every community which is not utterly spoiled, asserted itself and demanded that condemnation should be expressed.

Still there was a certain reticence in all, and no more notice was taken of the existing facts than was absolutely necessary. Margaret Delandre bore herself so fearlessly and so openly—she accepted her position as the justified companion of Geoffrey Brent so naturally that people came to believe that she was secretly married to him, and therefore thought it wiser to hold their tongues lest time should justify her and also make her an active enemy.

The one person who, by his interference, could have settled all doubts was debarred by circumstances from interfering in the matter. Wykham Delandre had quarreled with his sister—or perhaps it was that she had quarreled with him—and they were on terms not merely of armed neutrality but of bitter hatred. The quarrel had been antecedent to Margaret going to Brent's Rock. She and Wykham had almost come to blows. There had certainly been threats on one side and on the other; and in the end Wykham, overcome with passion, had ordered his sister to leave his house. She had risen straightway, and, without waiting to pack up even her own personal belongings, had walked out of the house.

On the threshold she had paused for a moment to hurl a bitter threat at Wykham that he would rue in shame and despair to the last hour of his life his act of that day. Some weeks had since passed; and it was understood in the neighborhood that Margaret had gone to London, when she suddenly appeared driving out with Geoffrey Brent, and the entire neighborhood knew before nightfall that she had taken up her abode at the Rock. It was no subject of surprise that Brent had come back unexpectedly, for such was his usual custom.

Even his own servants never knew when to expect him, for there was a private door, of which he alone had the key, by which he sometimes entered without anyone in the house being aware of his coming. This was his usual method of appearing after a long absence.

Wykham Delandre was furious at the news. He vowed vengeance—and to keep his mind level with his passion drank deeper than ever. He tried several times to see his sister, but she contemptuously refused to meet him. He tried to have an interview with Brent and was refused by him also. Then he tried to stop him in the road, but without avail, for Geoffrey was not a man to be stopped against his will. Several actual encounters took place between the two men, and many more were threatened and avoided. At last Wykham Delandre settled down to a morose, vengeful acceptance of the situation.

Neither Margaret nor Geoffrey was of a pacific temperament, and it was not long before there began to be quarrels between them. One thing would lead to another, and wine flowed freely at Brent's Rock. Now and again the quarrels would assume a bitter aspect, and threats would be exchanged in uncompromising language that fairly awed the listening servants. But such quarrels generally ended where domestic altercations do, in reconciliation, and in a mutual respect for the fighting qualities proportionate to their manifesta-

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tion. Fighting for its own sake is found by a certain class of persons, all the world over, to be a matter of absorbing interest, and there is no reason to believe that domestic conditions minimize its potency. Geoffrey and Margaret made occasional absences from Brent's Rock, and on each of these occasions Wykham Delandre also absented himself; but as he generally heard of the absence too late to be of any service, he returned home each time in a more bitter and discontented frame of mind than before.

At last there came a time when the absence from Brent's Rock became longer than before. Only a few days earlier there had been a quarrel, exceeding in bitterness anything which had gone before; but this, too, had been made up, and a trip on the Continent had been mentioned before the servants. After a few days Wykham Delandre also went away, and it was some weeks before he returned. It was noticed that he was full of some new importance —satisfaction, exaltation—they hardly knew how to call it. He went straightway to Brent's Rock, and demanded to see Geoffrey Brent, and on being told that he had not yet returned, said, with a grim decision which the servants noted:

"I shall come again. My news is solid—it can wait!" and turned away. Week after week went by, and month after month; and then there came a rumor, certified later on, that an accident had occurred in the Zermatt valley. While crossing a dangerous pass the carriage containing an English lady and the driver had fallen over a precipice, the gentleman of the party, Mr. Geoffrey Brent, having been fortunately saved, as he had been walking up the hill to ease the horses. He gave information, and search was made.

The broken rail, the excoriated roadway, the marks where the horses had struggled on the decline before finally pitching over into the torrent—all told the sad tale. It was a wet season, and there had been much snow in the winter, so that the river was swollen beyond its usual volume, and the eddies of the stream were packed with ice. All search was made, and finally the wreck of the carriage and the body of one horse were found in an eddy of the river.

Later on the body of the driver was found on the sandy, torrent-swept waste near Tasch; but the body of the lady, like that of the other horse, had quite disappeared, and was—what was left of it by that time—whirling amongst the eddies of the Rhone on its way down to the Lake of Geneva.

Wykham Delandre made all the inquiries possible, but could not find any trace of the missing woman. He found, however, in the books of the various hotels the name of "Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Brent." And he had a stone erected at Zermatt to his sister's memory, under her married name, and a tablet put up in the church at Bretten, the parish in which both Brent's Rock and Dander's Croft were situated.

THERE was a lapse of nearly a year, after the excitement of the matter had worn away, and the whole neighborhood had gone on its accustomed way. Brent was still absent, and Delandre more drunken, more morose, and more revengeful than before.

Then there was a new excitement. Brent's Rock was being made ready for a new mistress. It was officially announced by Geoffrey himself in a letter to the Vicar, that he had been married some months before to an Italian lady, and that they were then on their way home. Then a small army of workmen invaded the house; and hammer and plane sounded, and a general air of size and paint pervaded the atmosphere. One wing of the old house, the south, was entirely redone; and when the great body of the workmen departed, leaving only materials for the doing of the old hall when Geoffrey Brent should have returned, for he had directed that the decoration was only to be done under his own eyes.

He had brought with him accurate drawings of a hall in the house of his bride's father, for he wished to reproduce for her the place to which she had been accustomed. As the molding had all to be redone, some scaffolding poles and boards were brought in and laid on one side of the great hall, and also a great wooden tank or box for mixing the lime, which was laid in bags beside it.

When the new mistress of Brent's Rock arrived the bells of the church rang out, and there was a general jubilation. She was a beautiful creature, full of the poetry and fire and passion of the South; and the few English words which she had learned were spoken in such a sweet and pretty broken way that she won the hearts of the people almost as much by the music of her voice as by the melting beauty of her dark eyes.

Geoffrey Brent seemed more happy than he had ever before appeared; but there

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was a dark, anxious look on his face that was new to those who knew him of old, and he started at times as though at some noise that was unheard by others.

And so months passed and the whisper grew that at last Brent's Rock was to have an heir. Geoffrey was very tender to his wife, and the new bond between them seemed to soften him. He took more interest in his tenants and their needs than he had ever done; and works of charity on his part as well as on his sweet young wife's were not lacking. He seemed to have set all his hopes on the child that was coming, and as he looked deeper into the future the dark shadow that had come over his face seemed to die gradually away.

All the time Wykham Delandre nursed his revenge. Deep in his heart had grown up a purpose of vengeance which only waited an opportunity to crystallize and take a definite shape. His vague idea was somehow centered in the wife of Brent, for he knew that he could strike him best through those he loved, and the coming time seemed to hold the opportunity for which he longed. One night he sat alone in the living-room of his house. It had once been a handsome room in its way, but time and neglect had done their work and it was now little better than a ruin, without dignity or picturesqueness of any kind. He had been drinking heavily for some time and was more than half-stupefied. He thought he heard a noise as of someone at the door and looked up. Then he called half savagely to come in; but there was no response. With a muttered blasphemy he renewed his potations.

Presently he forgot all around him, sank into a daze, but suddenly awoke to see standing before him some one or something like a battered, ghostly edition of his sister. For a few moments there came upon him a sort of fear. The woman before him, with distorted features and burning eyes seemed hardly human, and the only thing that seemed a reality of his sister, as she had been, was her wealth of golden hair, and this was now streaked with gray. She eyed her brother with a long, cold stare; and he, too, as he looked and began to realize the actuality of her presence, found the hatred of her which he had had, once again surging up in his heart. All the brooding passion of the past year seemed to find a voice at once as he asked her:

"Why are you here? You're dead and buried."

"I am here, Wykham Delandre, for no love of you, but because I hate another even more than I do you!" A great passion blazed in her eyes.

"Him?" he asked, in so fierce a whisper that even the woman was for an instant startled till she regained her calm.

"Yes, him!" she answered. "But make no mistake, my revenge is my own; and I merely use you to help me to it." Wykham asked suddenly:

"Did he marry you?"

The woman's distorted face broadened out in a ghastly attempt at a smile. It was a hideous mockery, for the broken features and seamed scars took strange shapes and strange colors, and queer lines of white showed out as the straining muscles pressed on the old cicatrices.

"So you would like to know! It would please your pride to feel that your sister was truly married! Well, you shall not know. That was my revenge on you, and I do not mean to change it by a hair's breadth. I have come here tonight simply to let you know that I am alive, so that if any violence be done me where I am going there may be a witness."

"Where are you going?" demanded her brother.

"That is my affair, and I have not the least intention of letting you know!"

Wykham stood up, but the drink was on him and he reeled and fell. As he lay on the floor he announced his intention of following his sister; and with an outburst of splenetic humor told her that he would follow her through the darkness by the light of her hair, and of her beauty. At this she turned on him, and said that there were others besides him that would rue her hair and her beauty too.

"As he will," she hissed; "for the hair remains though the beauty be gone. When he withdrew the lynch-pin and sent us over the precipice into the torrent, he had little thought of my beauty. Perhaps his beauty would be scarred like mine were he whirled, as I was, among the rocks of the Visp, and frozen on the ice pack in the drift of the river. But let him beware! His time is coming!" and with a fierce gesture she flung open the door and passed out into the night.

LATER on that night, Mrs. Brent, who was but half-asleep, became suddenly awake and spoke to her husband:

"Geoffrey, was not that the click of a lock somewhere below our window?"

But Geoffrey—though she thought that he, too, had started at the noise—seemed

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sound asleep, and breathed heavily. Again Mrs. Brent dozed; but this time awoke to the fact that her husband had arisen and was partially dressed. He was deadly pale, and when the light of the lamp which he had in his hand fell on his face, she was frightened at the look in his eyes.

"What is it, Geoffrey? What are you doing?" she asked.

For reply he merely kissed her and went out, closing the door behind him. She lay awake for awhile, and then nature asserted itself, and she slept.

Suddenly she started broad awake with the memory in her ears of a smothered cry from somewhere not far off. She jumped up and ran to the door and listened, but there was no sound.

After a few moments the door of the great hall opened, and Geoffrey appeared at it, but without his lamp.

"Hush!" he said, in a sort of whisper, and his voice was harsh and stern. "Hush! Get to bed! I am working, and must not be disturbed. Go to sleep, and do not wake the house!"

With a chill in her heart—for the harshness of her husband's voice was new to her—she crept back to bed and lay there trembling, too frightened to cry, and listened to every sound. There was a long pause of silence, and then the sound of some iron implement striking muffled blows! Then there came a clang of a heavy stone falling, followed by a muffled curse. Then a dragging sound, and then more noise of stone on stone. She lay all the while in an agony of fear, and her heart beat dreadfully. She heard a curious sort of scraping sound; and then there was silence. Presently the door opened gently, and Geoffrey appeared. His wife pretended to be asleep; but through her eyelashes she saw him wash from his hands something white that looked like lime.

From that day there seemed some shadow over Geoffrey Brent. He neither ate nor slept as he had been accustomed, and his former habit of turning suddenly as though someone were speaking from behind him revived. The old hall seemed to have some kind of fascination for him. He used to go there many times in the day, but grew impatient if anyone, even his wife, entered it. When the builder's foreman came to inquire about continuing his work Geoffrey was out driving; the man went into the hall, and when Geoffrey returned the servant told him of his arrival and where he was. With a frightful oath he pushed the servant aside and hurried up to the old hall. The workman met him almost at the door.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I was just going out to make some inquiries. I directed twelve sacks of lime to be sent here, but I see there are only ten."

"Damn the ten sacks and the twelve too!" was the ungracious and incomprehensible rejoinder.

The workman looked surprised, and tried to turn the conversation.

"I see, sir, there is a little matter which our people must have done; but the governor will of course see it set right."

"What do you mean?"

"That 'ere 'arthstone, sir: Some idiot must have put a scaffold pole on it and cracked it right down the middle, and it's thick enough you'd think to stand hanythink." Geoffrey was silent for quite a minute, and then said in a constrained voice and with much gentler manner:

"Tell your people that I am not going on with the work in the hall at present. I want to leave it as it is for a while longer."

ONCE or twice Delandre tried to stop Brent on the road, and, at last, finding that he could not attain his object, rode after the carriage, calling out:

"What has become of my sister, your wife?" Geoffrey lashed his horses into a gallop, and the other, seeing from his white face and from his wife's collapse almost into a faint that his object was attained, rode away with a scowl and a laugh.

That night when Geoffrey went into the hall he passed over to the great fireplace, and all at once started back with a smothered cry. Then with an effort he pulled himself together and went away, returning with a light. He bent down over the broken hearthstone to see if the moonlight falling through the storied window had in any way deceived him. Then with a groan of anguish he sank to his knees.

There, sure enough, through the crack in the broken stone were protruding a multitude of threads of golden hair just tinged with gray!

He was disturbed by a noise at the door, and looking round, saw his wife standing in the doorway. In the desperation of the moment he took action to prevent discovery, and lighting a match at the lamp, stooped down and burned away the hair that rose through the broken stone.

For the next week he lived in an agony; for, whether by accident or design, he could not find himself alone in the hall

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for any length of time. At each visit the hair had grown afresh through the crack, and he had to watch it carefully lest his terrible secret should be discovered. He tried to find a receptacle for the body of the murdered woman outside the house, but someone always interrupted him; and once, when he was coming out of the private doorway, he was met by his wife, who began to question him about it, and manifested surprise that she should not have before noticed the key which he now reluctantly showed her.

That very evening she came into the hall, found him there, and said:

"Geoffrey, I have been spoken to by that fellow Delandre, and he says horrible things. He says that a week ago his sister returned to his house, the wreck and ruin of her former self, with only her golden hair as of old, and announced some fell intention. He asked me where she is—and oh, Geoffrey, she is dead, she is dead! So how can she have returned? Oh, I am in dread, and I know not where to turn!"

For answer, Geoffrey burst into a torrent of blasphemy which made her shudder. He cursed Delandre and his sister and all their kind, and in especial he hurled curse after curse on her golden hair.

"Oh, hush! hush!" she said, and was then silent, for she feared her husband when she saw the evil effect of his humor. Geoffrey in the torrent of his anger stood up and moved away from the hearth; but suddenly stopped as he saw a new look of terror in his wife's eyes. He followed their glance, and then he, too, shuddered —for there on the broken hearthstone lay a golden streak as the points of the hair rose through the crack.

"Look, look!" she shrieked. "Is it some ghost of the dead! Come away—come away!" and seizing her husband by the wrist with the frenzy of madness, she pulled him from the room.

That night she was in a raging fever. The doctor of the district attended her at once, and special aid was telegraphed for to London. Geoffrey was in despair, and in his anguish at the danger of his young wife almost forgot his own crime and its consequences. In the evening the doctor had to leave to attend to others.

"Remember, you must humor her till I come in the morning, or till some other doctor has her case in hand," he said.

Late in the evening, when the rest of the household had retired, Geoffrey's wife got up from her bed and called him.

"Come!" she said. "Come to the old hall! I know where the gold comes from! I want to see it grow!"

Geoffrey would fain have stopped her, but he feared for her life or reason on the one hand, and lest in a paroxysm she should shriek out her terrible suspicion, and seeing that it was useless to try to prevent her, wrapped a warm rug around her and went with her to the old hall. When they entered, she turned and shut the door and locked it.

"We want no strangers amongst us three to-night!" she whispered with a wan smile.

"We three! nay, we are but two," said Geoffrey with a shudder; he feared to say more.

"Sit here," said his wife as she put out the light. "Sit here by the hearth and watch the gold growing. The silver moonlight is jealous! See it steals along the floor towards the gold—our gold!" Geoffrey looked with growing horror, and saw that during the hours that had passed the golden hair had protruded further through the broken hearthstone. He tried to hide it by placing his feet over the broken place; and his wife, drawing her chair beside him, laid her head on his shoulder.

"Now do not stir, dear," she said: "let us sit still and watch. We shall find the secret of the growing gold!" He passed his arm round her and sat silent; and as the moonlight stole along the floor she sank to sleep.

He feared to wake her; and so sat silent and miserable as the hours stole away.

Before his horror-struck eyes the golden hair from the broken stone grew and grew; and as it increased, so his heart got colder and colder, till at last he had not power to stir, and sat with eyes full of terror watching his doom.

IN THE morning when the London doctor came, neither Geoffrey nor his wife could be found. Search was made in all the rooms, but without avail. As a last resource the great door of the old hall was broken open, and those who entered saw a grim and sorry sight.

There by the deserted hearth Geoffrey Brent and his young wife sat cold and white and dead. Her face was peaceful, and her eyes were closed in sleep; but his face was a sight that made all who saw it shudder, for there was on it a look of unutterable horror. The eyes were open and stared glassily at his feet, which were twined with tresses of golden hair, streaked with gray, which came through the broken hearthstone.

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(Continued from page 8)

In respect to recent issues: "The Island of Captain Sparrow" was only fair, certainly not equal in quality to "Deluge", by the same author.

"The Willows" is of course a masterpiece, and Benson's short was quite good.

"Before the Dawn", by Taine, was a splendid novel. The only prehistoric I have ever read to compare with it was "Warrior of the Dawn", by Howard Browne, and as I think this originally appeared in a magazine it wouldn't be eligible for *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.* Congratulations.

Requests for future publication (aside from Lovecraft's novel): "Starmaker", by Stapledon; "Seaports in the Moon", by Starrett; "Star-Begotten", by Wells, and any possible stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Clark Ashton Smith, H. Rider Haggard, and Lord Dunsany.

I still think that A. Merritt's "Moon Pool" is the greatest story ever printed in F.F.M., but I have an open mind, so keep the novels coming as they have been and I may be forced to reconsider. Keep up the good work; you've got a fine magazine.

DAVID J. THOMAS.

31 Linnaean St.
Cambridge 38,
Mass.

EXCHANGE OFFER

I should be very grateful if you would publish this letter in an early issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.*

I have more than fifty old science-fiction magazines and several books of the fantasy and science-fiction type which I wish to dispose of as quickly as possible. Among these are parts of E. E. Smith's novels, *The Skylark of Space, Skylark Three, The Skylark of Valeron, Spacehounds of I.P.C.,* and the whole of *Triplanetary* and *Galactic Patrol; Legion of Space,* and *The Universe Wreckers;* the complete novels, *Sinister Barrier, The Black Flame, Beyond the End of Space, The Second Deluge, Tomorrow, Survival,* and *The Sunken World.* The books include *The King in Yellow, John Silence, Sugar in the Air,* and *Ayesha.*

I will give all of these in exchange for a clean and complete copy of the Lovecraft Memorial Collection, *The Outsider and Others* (Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin, 1939). Will anyone willing to exchange please write to me as soon as possible, and I will send a list giving dates and descriptions of condition, and such?

I was very pleased to learn that F.F.M. will be published more often now.

Congratulations.

Get back Virgil Finlay and Hannes Bok, and do something about reprinting Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist,* will you, please?

Yours in Fantasy,
T. G. L. COCKCROFT.

7 Roslyn Road,
Napier,
New Zealand.

CAREFUL SUMMING UP

At long last I have finished the Feb. '46 issue of F.F.M. What with a multitude of other duties and things to do, I could never quite get the time to read the issue at a few sittings. And the April issue is out already too!

The Feb. cover was very good, though without the fine definite coloring of Finlay's technique. At any rate it was not lurid and helped arouse interest in the story. The interior illustrations were also good, with the "House of the Secret" pics taking highest honors.

John Taine's "novel" was very interesting, a sort of description of prehistoric times, lightly tinted with fiction. It gives one a thoughtful, constructive picture of a turbulent era.

"The House of the Secret," a truly leisurely novel, was also good. It was a good find; get some more like it! Toward the middle I feared the "Ever-Living Man" would degenerate into the usual "bogey-men" stuff; fortunately they didn't. The treatment of the affair with Madeline reminded me a little of de Maupassant. It was an adult story, and will undoubtedly result in your receiving many letters from youthful constituents condemning it. However, more of Farrère's work, if there are any, will be right in place in the mag. Lawrence's frontispiece for this story was excellent and helped establish a definite aura for it.

I did not agree with some of your letter-writers as represented in the issue; those who argued that "Even a Worm" was poorly written or inane, passé, should reread it. It has suspense, dry humor, and sustained interest. "The Hashish Man" was as good as any of Dunsany you've had thus far, and that is saying something; I cannot see why a reader condemns it. "Two Bottles of Relish" is a story by Dunsany that I guarantee to enthrall *anyone;* however, it's not fantasy, and has been in magazine form, so it's out for F.F.M.

"The Machine Stops" was not a "classic" but it was good, not "awful—it really was" as one fan puts it. Likewise for "Before I Wake." Of course, everyone to his own opinion; none of us is infallible.

But I have only harsh words for Lt. Coleman, Air Corps, who says: "I cannot recall a single short story in F.F.M. which wasn't insipid, boresome, and utterly without thought-provoking qualities." He gives "The Hashish Man" as an example!

Since he started to read the mag. in late 1942, naturally he missed the Merritt short stories, The Tod Robbins, Philip Fisher and Austin Hall shorts, and others like "Others Man's Blood", "Moon Metal", etc., etc. But he did read, I presume, "The Demoiselle D'Ys", "The Yellow Sign", and "The Mask" by Chambers; "Doorway into Time" by Moore; the Dunsany shorts, etc. Fie upon you, Lieutenant; flash your rank upon me!

Continued success,

BEN INDICK.

T/4 Ben Indick, 42103189
HQ and TC Det.
Fort Mason, Calif.

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"THE WILLOWS" APPRECIATED

I read in the "Readers' Viewpoint" that a Lawrence portfolio was published by you. Do you know how I can get a portfolio of his pictures? I just began reading F.F.M. this month so I wouldn't know anything about any offers made before this issue.

The story, "The Willows", by Algernon Blackwood, was excellent, especially the way he describes the willows. It is one of Blackwood's greatest, if not the best of his stories.

"Roderick's Story," by E. F. Benson, was interesting too but I think it doesn't compare with any of H. P. Lovecraft's stories for style or horrific effect.

After reading "The Willows" and "Roderick's Story", you can be sure I'll be solid F.F.M. reader.

I'm not saying anything about "The Island of Captain Sparrow" by S. Fowler Wright because I didn't like it. What a silly plot!

If you have a copy of "Beyond the Wall of Sleep", in good condition, by H. P. Lovecraft, write me.

DAVID KISHI.

171 West End Ave.,
New York 23,
N. Y.

Editor's Note: The Lawrence Portfolio can be purchased by sending 75c to F.F.M.

PRAISE AND CRITICISM

Aside from story content, the April issue is a sore let-down from the last four or five artistic jobs. Lawrence has done what is by far his worst cover, and possibly the poorest F.F.M. has ever published (though Finlay's infamous one for "The Afterglow" rivals this in bad taste). It is exceedingly muddy, and there is an astounding overuse of unwise coloring. The other reasons I do not like it are its utterly crude, stereotyped gal-hero-monster situation, and absurdity of clothing.

Every cheap magazine you pick up, whether devoted to science-fiction or not, has the situation motif; either a handsome faultlessly attired Northwest Mounted Policeman (with a well-placed trickle of blood down his left cheek) is fending off twenty-eight polar bears with a broken spruce twig in order to preserve a gorgeous female, whose expression invariably proves her not being worth saving, or else we find a dashing spacean accoutred in seventeen thicknesses of Iridium-sponge rubber saving his loved one from the toothy maw of an eight foot worfsniggle. You yourself know how disgusting it has become.

The April F.F.M. was not far from this. We are, I know, supposed to accept it as being symbolic—but symbolism is generally hand-in-hand with fine craftsmanship. And the clothing! The poor girl must spend all her moments, when not being clutched by skeletal paws, holding the garment to her. That is, unless she's read about these new type proposed evening dresses. And the black background is, if nothing else, unapropos. I hope and pray, fervently, that we are never presented with as poor a cover in the future. However, having seen a photo of next issue's, (June) I think Lawrence might be building us up for his very best work.

The novel, of course, is a different matter. I found it, aside from a few well-meaning lapses into the extra-adventure medium, a thoroughly entertaining story, from beginning to end. It displayed certain aspects of Merritt's style, I thought, and had not a few traces of Somerset Maugham's particular type of descriptive passages. This is not to say it wasn't distinctive, because it most decidedly was—but these similarities stuck with me throughout the tale.

I have been waiting for "The Willows" for a long time, along with most of your other steady readers, and am most appreciative now that you've finally published it. This is definitely one of the greatest tales of the supernatural as yet produced, though no amount of praise could do it justice. Blackwood has woven a beautifully suspenseful story of atmosphere, and no matter how hard the reader tries, he finds himself an integral part of the narrative, experiencing each shudder of terror and each spine-tingling realization. Here is the apex of the "ghost-story" and the ideal at which literary ingenues may aim. H. P. Lovecraft was right when he said " . . . for no one has even approached the skill, seriousness and minute fidelity with which he records the overtones of strangeness in ordinary things and experiences, or the preternatural insight with which he builds up detail by detail the complete sensations and perceptions leading from reality into subnormal life or vision. He is the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere!" Let us by all means have more by Blackwood.

"Roderick's Story" was excellent, and a good example of Benson's technique. More short stories of this type would be welcomed. I'm especially pleased that you are not carrying things like Archibald's utterly superficial "Heaven Only Knows." You have a wealth of material in the old masters (and modern ones) to draw from, and I see no good reason for printing stories like this latter mentioned.

The illustrations this issue are not particularly appealing, though there isn't a really bad one in the lot.

The remaining illustrations for the novel do not display much imagination or good craftsmanship, and though the one for "The Willows" is not half bad, it does not capture the mood of the story (even if it does try valiantly). It comes nearer than Fox's horribly stiff poster for "The Wendigo" but doesn't quite make it. One artist I know of could do the job perfectly—perhaps you have seen some of his work: Lee Conrey. Clyne's drawing for the short story is probably the best in the issue, combining finesse with delicacy. It's been said more than once that all of Clyne's figures somehow resemble Poe. Do you notice this? One of the most pleasing and utterly delightful things in this issue, however, is Lawrence's decoration on page 53. The two satyrs are wonderful!

JOAN MOHLER.

2721 16th St.
Everett, Wash.

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THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

INTERESTING NEWS

I have read with interest letters appearing in some of the more recent issues of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and have noticed particularly the pleas for aid in obtaining back Science-Fiction and Fantasy material. I have literally hundreds of magazines to dispose of at the present time including complete runs of most of the established periodicals. I also plan to dispose of many books by such authors as Taine, Stapledone, Cummings, etc., etc.

I was pleased to notice the more regular publication of your excellent magazine. May I purchase from you directly issues of F.F.M. after September 1945 and a copy or two of the October 1941 publication?

I suggest, for diversity, you publish some rather rare reprints in your magazine, of books now unobtainable or nearly so. I refer to such fascinating manuscripts as "To Mars Via Moon", "The Sunless City", "People of the Moon", "Plunge into Space", "A.D. 2000". These are excellent books and beyond the reach of the average reader.

FREDERICK I. ORDWAY, III.

2929 Ordway St. N.W.
Washington, D. C.

Editor's Note: We do not have any back issues of F.F.M. left over.

WANTS FANTASY FRIENDS

I've been a Fantasy fan for a long time and have been reading F.F.M. ever since she started. It's a great magazine, and it brings us grand stories which we probably never would get a chance to read. My uncle took *All Story* and *Argosy* since 'way back when, and he saved them all—quite a closet full, too—and then when they were *too* many, a few years ago, he took them all apart and put the best (and most) of the novels together and bound them in book form, and gave them to me. Bless his heart! So—I have the most wonderful collection of Fantasy fiction you ever saw! Say—you always leave one of my favorites, Ray Cummings, out of your "author" lists! I protest! But they're all swell. I don't have a favorite. I just like them interesting.

Another thing—Lovecraft is an Author with a Capital A, but don't you think most of his stories are more of the "horror" type? My idea of Fantasy is more like "The Girl of the Golden Atom", "The Ship of Ishtar", the "Tarzan" and "Mars" stories by E. R. Burroughs, and the stories by H. R. Haggard. I have a full set of the "Golden Atom" stories—and they're really swell.

Some of the letters in the Readers' Viewpoint are so interesting, I'd like to know those people. Especially some of those who show such a delicious sense of humor and a tolerence for stories of all kinds, realizing though they may not care for a story, others do. If any Fantasy fan would like to talk books, or exchange books and magazines, I'd love to hear from you. I collect stamps, too, so all your letters from far countries would be received with extra glee!

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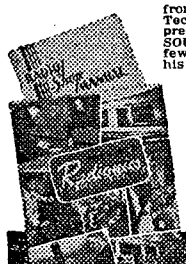

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

And, dear Editor, thank you for all the grand stories—and let's do something about that complete A. Merritt book, huh?

THELMA E. ZANDER.
520 Bayard St.
Ionia, Mich.

AGREES WITH LT. COLEMAN

For many years, I have been an ardent science fiction fan. Since I have gradually accumulated my education, my thoughts have deviated from the more adventuresome stories to the psychological and imaginative stories of the mind. In all, I like the stories which will teach me something. Thus far, F.F.M. has done a wonderful job in keeping me supplied with the stuff which keeps my imagination active. I believe an active imagination to be the ally of success, thus permitting an excellent reason for reading science fiction other than amusement.

One of the features which I find underdeveloped in most S.F. magazines is an adequate readers' department. Were it not for the "correspondence" corners, like the excellent one in F.F.M, a magazine would lose much of its value. Of what value is reading unless there is left with the reader something to think about—something to discuss? I have found my reading in S.F. has given me benefits which I have not obtained from the so-called best sellers of fiction. But then, one man's opinion is another man's poison, it often seems.

It is hard to criticize stories, for I realize I could not do as well myself, but I believe a good story should be developed equally well in plot and uniformity. Now, referring to "Before the Dawn"—Feb. issue, when a man walks on ground of solid light, yet passes through a rock of solid light, I get the feeling that the story is destroyed. The author sort of leaped out of the limitations he had set earlier. Again, from one specimen of exploration, he obtained scenes of incidents hundreds of miles "around" the earth. In other words, it seems to me the rock (specimen) recorded sights which were far beyond its visual range. As we followed Belshazzar's pursuit of his enemy (later, Satan) it seemed as though our specimen was flying along beside him to record the story, and the author's explanation was rather weak.

The story was good, nevertheless, and it doesn't pay to be too particular about those little incidents. If my lengthy letter arouses the ire of any vehement fan, I suggest they send me an epistle to release their wrath. I shall welcome the correspondence. Incidentally, Lt. Coleman's letter was very good, "taking the words right out of my mouth," as it were.

PFC. ROY B. KRIEGH.
1154th Engineer Combat Group,
Camp White, Oregon.

"LAWRENCE" ADMIRER

Having thoroughly perused and digested the contents if your April issue, I feel compelled to pen this missive of appreciation. F.F.M. has

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been steadily rising these many moons, and now, at least in my opinion, it has reached the pinnacle of the fantasy and s-f field.

The April issue was especially noteworthy for those readable classics, "The Willows" and "The Island of Captain Sparrow". I can find no fault with the present format of F.F.M., and trust that you have Lawrence under life contract, for his covers are the best of any mag.

My favorite pastime is poring over a small collection of s-f, weird and fantasy mags of a rainy evening, and F.F.M. is the prize of them all.

GEORGE M. AYLESWORTH.

P.O. Box 460
Mackinaw City, Mich.

FANDOM GATHERS

Want to join a live-wire organization for readers of fantastic and scientific fiction? A club whose members include some of the most popular professional writers and artists and most of the prominent eastern fantasy enthusiasts? Well, such an organization does exist, devoted to the task of bringing fans of the New York area together through the medium of worthwhile projects and large interesting meetings.

The nucleus of the organization is the A-Men, the same society that sponsored the First Post-War Science-Fiction Convention, held in Newark several months ago. That same city will harbor future meetings of the new larger society.

Any of you who are interested and want to be in on the formation of the society can do so by writing me.

GEORGE FOX, SECRETARY A-MEN.

460 Orchard St.,
Rahway, N. J.

RATING APRIL ISSUE

My rating of the stories in the April issue is as follows:

1. "The Willows". The fact that a good many of us read this story before in no way detracts from its interest. A classic like this can easily be read twice.

2. "The Island of Captain Sparrow". Good. Anything by Wright is interesting.

3. "Roderick's Story." The usual filler-type short.

In my opinion, your art department is the best I have ever seen in a pulp. But where did that cover come from?

I have a copy of Lovecraft's "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," "Marginalia," "Supernatural Horror in Literature", "The Lurker at the Threshold", "The Maze" by Sandoz; with Dali illustrations, all in good condition with original binding and dust covers. I also have a few copies of F.F.M.s Namely, "The Iron Star," Taine; "The Golden City", Farley; "The Machine Stops" by Smith, all of which I can be persuaded to part with.

ROBERT SPERLING.

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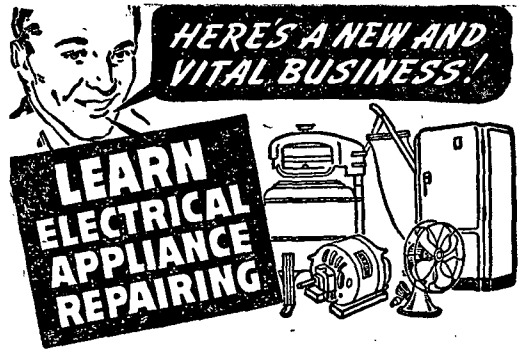

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

LIKED APRIL COVER

After receiving my latest F.F.M. today, I could not help but write you, complimenting you upon your latest selections, and especially upon the beautiful work the artistic wonderman, Lawrence, has produced. The picture of the gorgeous girl and the satyr took my breath away. You must include this master-pic in your next portfolio.

I was elated to find that our mag. is to be published more often. The lapse between issues, the waiting for a new masterpiece of fantasy, is none too good upon an avid fan's nervous system.

"The Island of Captain Sparrow" appears to be a good if not excellent yarn. I have not read it as yet.

"The Willows" is a high-ranker; Blackwood's phrasing power fascinates me. It runs along as smoothly as a well-oiled machine, clicking into place one terrible fact after another, until, like the brink of a waterfall, the climax is reached. This yarn and his duo height-of-horror, "The Wendigo", are undoubtedly his best. The time over which I read them will remain in my mind as the most suspenseful hours I have ever spent.

And now, some requests: One Wright story deserves another. I would like to read his "Deluge" very much; more Haggard, please; Burroughs, as many are suggesting, would fit in very nicely; "Cursed" by England; "Last and First Men" by Stapledon; remaining novels by Taine; "Lair of the White Worm" by Stoker.

Of the titles above, I have read none, but I wish to a great deal.

I am still enthusiastic over the idea of reviving *Fantastic Novels*. In this you could print the wonderful tales of A. Merritt. Yes, I am a Merritt fanatic, too.

In closing, I hope to see the Editor's Page return, trimmed edges brought back, and the unique page of fantasy verse revived in my favorite magazine, F.F.M.

VERNON HODGES.

P.O. Box 28
Denair, Calif.

"CAPT. SPARROW" GOOD

Just got my hands on the April issue and read the letters first, as to be expected.

I never came across Benson in fantasy mood before, but I loved his books and know him for a writer of style and imagination. As for Blackwood, never read "The Willows" but I know the man, having visited as a kid an ancient relative with several bound volumes of Blackwood's works.

I would like to suggest a story if it isn't too far out of your line, "Melmoth", by I don't know whom.

I missed the issue with the Allan Quatermain story, and wonder if anyone could spare it me? Horrible to relate, I never read Haggard; when I first came across him, I was being very bored with Burroughs, Verne, etc., and when I heard his stuff was fantasy I turned it down.

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THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

Now I kick myself, because I can't find it at the library and always seem to miss reprints in the magazines.

Could anyone help a gal out?

I'm now about half-way through "The Island of Captain Sparrow" and it really looks good! The illustration opposite p. 30 is marvelous!

The story is literature!

PEGGY EDWARDS.

134 Warren St.,
Brooklyn 2, N. Y.

F.F.M. A GODSEND

I find your magazine a godsend. Your reprinting of the great fantasy writers deserves praise. Would you let me know your new rates for a year's subscription? If anyone reading this letter would like the following to trade, would you please get in touch with me:

"The Purple Cloud", by M. P. Shiel; "Wandering Ghosts" by F. M. Crawford; "Touch of Nutmeg" by John Collier; "Dreamers' Tales" by Lord Dunsany; "War in the Air" by H. G. Wells; all the above are in perfect condition.

LEON GROSS.

1145 Longfellow Ave.
Bronx 59, N. Y.

Editor's Note: The subscription price of F.F.M. is $1.50.

WANTS BI-WEEKLY F.F.M.

Read the April issue of F.F.M., and didn't like "The Island of Captain Sparrow," but "The Willows" by Blackwood was well worth the price of the magazine. More by Blackwood, Haggard, Taine, Machen. Thanks to the Chicago Public Library, I have read most of Haggard's Quatermain works; most of them are not fantastic enough for F.F.M. but "She and Allen", "Wisdom's Daughter", etc., are O.K.

As long as you continue to give us good stories, everybody will be satisfied. These complaints about edges, titles, etc. belong in the waste basket (along with letter).

For a job well done, thanks.

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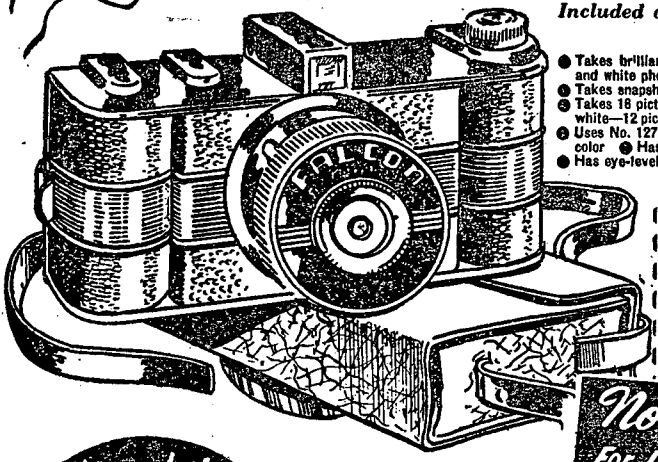

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$2.59 Plus 20c Mailing Charge

- Yes! It's all metal.
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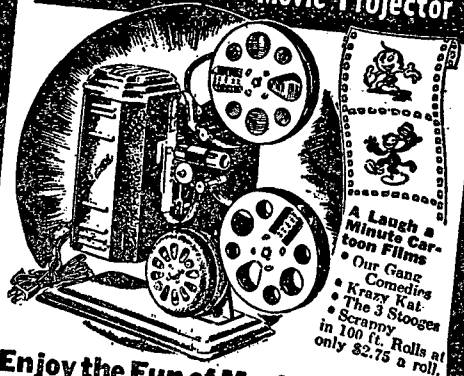

A Laugh a Minute Cartoon Films

- Our Gang Comedies
- Krazy Kat
- The 3 Stooges
- Scrappy

in 100 ft. Rolls at only $2.75 a roll.

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This is the Finest Low-Priced Motor-Driven Projector Available. Comes furnished with a 200 ft. Take-up Reel, 2-inch lens in focusing mount, tilting device, 120-watt lamp, accessible Spring Belt Drive, Motor Driven Rewind, Switch control Motor, Baked on Enamel Finish and Power-House Type Constant speed motor, A.C. only. Shipping wt. 7 lbs.

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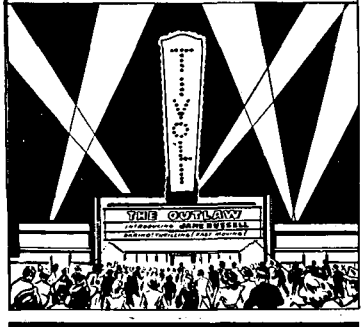
The Outlaw

HERE'S WHY THIS THRILLING NEW PICTURE HAS BEEN KEPT OFF THE SCREEN FOR TWO YEARS!

1944—**HOWARD HUGHES,** WORLD FAMOUS FLYER AND MOTION PICTURE PRODUCER, COMPLETES HIS PICTURE **THE OUTLAW.**

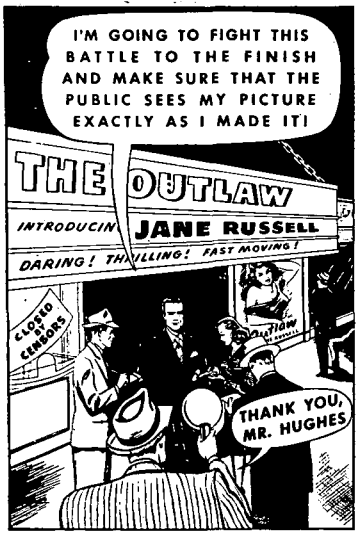
HOWARD HUGHES DISCOVERED JEAN HARLOW, PAUL MUNI, GEORGE RAFT, AND PAT O'BRIEN. NOW, IN **THE OUTLAW,** HE PRESENTS HIS SENSATIONAL NEW STAR DISCOVERY—
JANE RUSSELL

JUNE, 1944—**THE OUTLAW** WORLD PREMIERE IS HELD AT SAN FRANCISCO. THE PICTURE BREAKS EVERY EXISTING RECORD!! HELD OVER FOR 8 WEEKS! PLAYS TO MORE THAN 300,000 PEOPLE!!



THE OUTLAW IS TRIGGER-FAST ACTION **COMBINED WITH DARING SENSATION TOO STARTLING TO DESCRIBE!**

THEN...**THE OUTLAW** IS BANNED BY THE CENSORS! BUT RATHER THAN CUT A SINGLE SCENE FROM THE FILM, **HOWARD HUGHES** WITHDRAWS IT FROM THE THEATRES OF THE WORLD.


I'M GOING TO FIGHT THIS BATTLE TO THE FINISH AND MAKE SURE THAT THE PUBLIC SEES MY PICTURE EXACTLY AS I MADE IT!
THE OUTLAW
INTRODUCING JANE RUSSELL
DARING! THRILLING! FAST MOVING!
CLOSED BY CENSORS
THANK YOU, MR. HUGHES

NOW, AT LAST, AFTER A TWO YEARS FIGHT WITH THE CENSORS, **HOWARD HUGHES** BRINGS YOU HIS DARING PRODUCTION, **THE OUTLAW...EXACTLY AS IT WAS FILMED!! NOT A SCENE CUT!!**—AND INTRODUCING A NEW STAR, **JANE RUSSELL!**

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